The New Criterion

December 2000

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

Notes & Comments, 1
Plutarch & the issue of character *by Roger Kimball*, 4
Longfellow & the fate of modern poetry *by John Derbyshire*, 12
Nelson Mandela *by Sarah Ruden*, 21
Umberto Saba *by Eric Ormsby*, 25
Gérard de Nerval's "Chimeras" *translated & introduced by Daniel Mark Epstein*, 31

Theater: The know nothings *by Mark Steyn*, 44; **Art:** Lee Krasner *by Karen Wilkin*, 49; Gallery chronicle *by Daniel Kunitz*, 54; **Music:** "Dead man walking" *by Patrick J. Smith*, 57; **The media** *by James Bowman*, 60; **Verse chronicle** *by William Logan*, 65

Books: *Irene Coates* Who's afraid of Leonard Woolf *reviewed by Brooke Allen*, 73; *John L. Casti & Werner DePauli* Gödel: a life of logic *reviewed by Martin Gardner*, 77; **Shorter notices** *by David Pryce-Jones & David Barber*, 80; **Notebook:** The Padilla affair *by Stephen Schwartz*, 84; **Letters**, 87

Volume 19, Number 4, $5.75

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Joan Miró

[1893–1983]

Sixteen Late Masterworks

November 27, 2000 – January 6, 2001

Co-organized with the
Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró a Mallorca

CATALOGUE AVAILABLE WITH ESSAYS BY
AURELIO TORRENTE LARROSA, AND KAREN WILKIN

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries

20 East 79 Street New York 10021 Tel (212) 879-6606

www.salander.com Monday-Saturday 9:30 to 5:30

Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró a Mallorca

Ajuntament de Palma

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FRANKENTHALER

Madame Butterfly

A new woodcut triptych
41¼ × 79 inches (104.7 x 200.6 cm)
Tyler Graphics Ltd., edition of 33

November 29, 2000 – January 6, 2001

Knoedler & Company

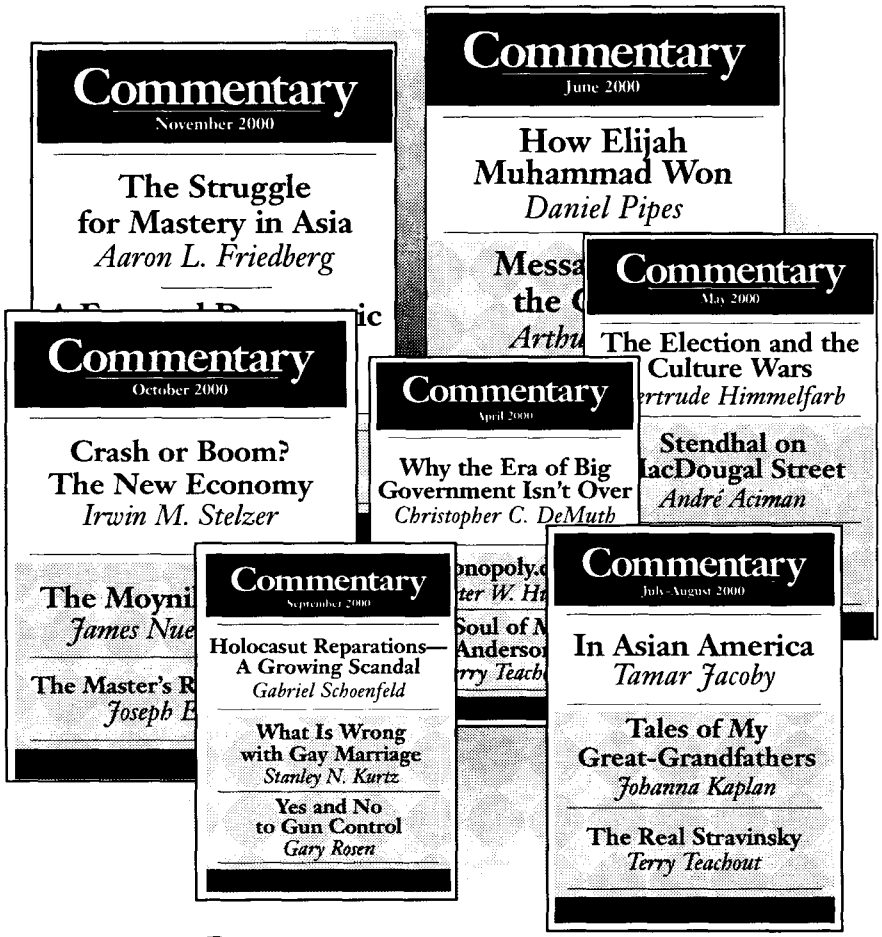
— ESTABLISHED 1846 —

19 East 70 Street New York 10021 Tel (212) 794-0550 Fax (212) 772-6932

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Nothing like it."

—A.M. Rosenthal



Commentary

Sound thinking for the 21st century.

$45.00 for 11 issues • Subscribe today! • $79.00 for 22 issues

Call 1 800 829-6270

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The New Criterion *December 2000*

Editor & Publisher *Hilton Kramer*
Managing Editor *Roger Kimball*
Poetry Editor *Robert Richman*
Associate Editor *Robert Messenger*
Assistant to the Editors *Sara E. Lussier*
Technical Associate *Max Watman*
Editorial Intern *Scott Kenemore*

Publisher 1982–1994 *Samuel Lipman*

Contributors to this issue

Brooke Allen reviews books regularly for *The New Criterion*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and other publications.

David Barber's book of poems, *The Spirit Level* (Northwestern), was awarded the 1996 Terrence De Pres Prize.

James Bowman is the American editor of the London *Times Literary Supplement* and the film critic of *The American Spectator*.

John Derbyshire's most recent production is the CD *36 Great American Poems*, available via his website at http://olimu.com.

Daniel Mark Epstein's most recent books are *Nat King Cole* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux) and *The Boy in the Well: Poems* (Overlook).

Martin Gardner's latest book is *Did Adam and Eve Have Navels?* (Norton).

Roger Kimball's new book, *Experiments Against Reality: The Fate of Culture in the Postmodern Age*, was just published by Ivan R. Dee.

Daniel Kunitz writes about art regularly for *The New Criterion*.

William Logan's latest book of poems is *Night Battle* (Penguin). His book of criticism, *Reputations of the Tongue*, was nominated for the National Book Critic's Circle Award.

Eric Ormsby wrote about Yeats's *Last Poems* in the September 2000 issue.

David Pryce-Jones is a senior editor of *National Review*. This review originally appeared in London's *Daily Mail*.

Sarah Ruden's translation of Petronius's *Satyricon* is available from Hackett.

Stephen Schwartz has just published, with the Mexican writer Antonio Saborit, a Spanish translation of the Bosnian writer Nedzad Ibrisimovic's *The Book of Adem Kahriman*.

Patrick J. Smith is a former editor of *Opera News*.

Mark Steyn is the senior North American correspondent for Britain's Telegraph Group.

Karen Wilkin is the author, with Isabel Fonseca and Alan Jenkins, of *Bruno Fonseca: The Secret Life of Painting* just out from Abbeville Press.

Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019, a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. ISSN 0734-0222. December 2000, Volume 19, Number 4. Subscriptions: $36 for one year, $65 for two. Outside the United States, add $7 per year. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster and subscribers: send change of address, all remittances, and subscription inquiries to The New Criterion, P.O. Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834. For subscription problems call (800) 783-4903. Copyright © 2000 by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc. Newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., One Media Way, 12406 Rt. 250, Milan, OH 44846. (800) 221-3148. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. All correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. (212) 247-6980. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to the Office Manager within three months of the issue date. **Internet: http://www.newcriterion.com Email: letters@newcriterion.com**

Advertising: Galleries & fine arts: Fred Stern, 44 Paulin Boulevard, Leonia, NJ 07605. (201) 947-2674.
Publishers & others: Richard A. Vaughan, 129 Phelps Avenue, Rockford, IL 61108. (815) 398-8569.

The New Criterion is designed by Alvin and James Eisenman. It is set in 10-point Galliard and is printed by Science Press in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, USA.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Sound of Great Ideas!®

The actual voices of... W.H. Auden • Robert Frost • Margaret Mead • Gilbert Highet • Winston Churchill • William Saroyan • Robert Lowell • Bruno Bettelheim • Arnold Toynbee • Eudora Welty . . . and many others.

HEAR what these provocative thinkers have to say about self-discovery, the quality of life, the nature of the creative mind, changes taking place in the world today, and what you can do to bring about change.

There's a difference in **hearing** new ideas rather than simply reading them. The author is able to provide his or her unique emphasis in ways impossible to accomplish in print. Pauses and tonal changes become meaning and create insights and increased understanding.

And audio cassettes provide a medium for learning experiences that can be shared simultaneously with someone else, thus encouraging immediate discussion and interaction.

Today's audio cassettes capture the inflections, nuances and flavor of the original speaker, and let you hear them over and over while driving, cooking, jogging, etc. Since some of these voices will never be heard again, here's your opportunity to savor the sound of great ideas that have shaped today's world, and to own these cassettes for your library.

From the more than 4,000 titles in the prestigious Audio-Forum Library, we have selected 26 extraordinary recordings. Imagine hearing these dynamic personalities in the intimacy of your own home! The regular price per cassette is $12.95. **But now for the special price of $9.95 you have the opportunity to listen whenever and wherever you choose. PLUS for every 3 cassettes you buy, we'll send you a cassette of your choice FREE!**

"The Sound of Great Ideas"
from **Audio-Forum**,
Suite P945, 96 Broad Street,
Guilford, CT 06437 • (203) 453-9794

The 26 audio cassettes listed here were chosen by a panel of experts who were asked to select only tapes which would be timely and relevant. Each has passed the simple test of genuine interest: "Would you want to listen to this tape again?"

HEAR these famous speakers:

- **A** **Winston Churchill:** *We Await Undismayed the Pending Assault* (20 min.)
- **B** **Margaret Mead:** *How People Change* (25 min.)
- **C** **Bruno Bettelheim:** *Man's Identity in a Mass Society* (48 min.)
- **D** **Salvador DeMadariaga:** *The Myth of Disarmament* (24 min.)
- **E** **W. H. Auden:** *The Poetry of W. H. Auden* (59 min.)
- **F** **Carlos Castaneda:** *Don Juan: The Sorcerer* (38 min.)
- **G** **Albert Schweitzer:** *On Goethe (trans. by Thornton Wilder)* (80 min.)
- **H** **Jacques Barzun:** *Present-Day Thoughts on the Quality of Life* (31 min.)
- **I** **Erich Fromm:** *To Have or to Be: The Nature of the Psyche* (56 min.)
- **J** **Robert Frost:** *An Evening with Robert Frost* (55 min.)
- **K** **Buckminster Fuller:** *Twentieth-Century Renaissance* (55 min.)
- **L** **Jacob Bronowski:** *The Ascent of Man* (55 min.)
- **M** **Gilbert Highet:** *Proverbs and Anatomy of Slang* (30 min.)
- **N** **Viktor E. Frankl:** *What Is Meant by Meaning* (33 min.)
- **O** **G. Wilson Knight:** *Shakespeare and the English Language* (30 min.)
- **P** **Robert Lowell:** *Reads and Discusses His Poetry* (28 min.)
- **Q** **William Manchester:** *The Glory and the Dream* (55 min.)
- **R** **Groucho Marx:** *Fast Mind, Faster Mouth* (60 min.)
- **S** **Edwin Newman:** *Decline and Fall of American Language* (55 min.)
- **T** **William Morris:** *Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins* (55 min.)
- **U** **George W. Kisker:** *Programmed Relaxation* (25 min.)
- **V** **William Saroyan:** *The Real World of the Writer* (48 min.)
- **W** **Upton Sinclair:** *A Pen to Change America* (40 min.)
- **X** **Stephen Spender:** *T.S. Eliot and George Orwell* (41 min.)
- **Y** **Eudora Welty:** *Learning to Write Fiction* (53 min.)
- **Z** **Arnold Toynbee:** *The Ancient Mediterranean View of Man* (24 min.)

☐ **YES!** Please send me the following selections at $9.95 each plus $1.00 shipping charge for the first tape, and .50 for each additional tape. (For shipments to CT, please add 6% sales tax.)

I understand that for every 3 cassettes I order, I will get one FREE!

My selections: ○○○○○○
My free selection: ○ ○

NAME (Print)

ADDRESS APT#

CITY, STATE, ZIP

Total amount of order: $_____
(Including tax and shipping)

☐ Check or money order enclosed
☐ VISA ☐ Discover Card
☐ Master Card ☐ Diners Club
☐ American Express ☐ Carte Blanche

CARD #

EXP. DATE

SIGNATURE

Mail To: **AUDIO-FORUM®**
Suite P945, 96 Broad Street,
Guilford, CT 06437 USA
(203) 453-9794 • fax (888) 453-4329

SP 945

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Notes & Comments: December 2000

The cultural revolution comes to the ballot box

Foremost among the many things to be said about the November elections is that they decisively confirmed what we have often observed in these pages: that the United States is now a nation in the grip of a cultural revolution. It goes without saying that liberals have regularly denied this fact; it pains us to observe that some happy, ostrich conservatives, too, have denied the significance of the transformations that have taken place in the social, intellectual, and moral fabric of America over the last forty years. But the November elections have vividly reminded us that, sooner or later, a cultural revolution has real political fallout.

As we write, almost a week after the election, the results of the presidential contest are still in abeyance. It is entirely possible that when you read this the results will still be in abeyance. At the moment, the entire race is said to turn on a few votes in Palm Beach County, Florida, a heavily Democratic redoubt. The Gore campaign did not like the original results there and demanded a recount. They did not like the results of the recount, either, and so demanded a hand count of some 19,000 disputed ballots. It is worth remembering that in 1960, when Richard Nixon narrowly lost to John F. Kennedy, and that again in 1976, when Gerald Ford narrowly lost to Jimmy Carter, the losers refused to demand a recount for fear of the political chaos it would bring to the country. It is also worth saying something about the now infamous "butterfly ballot," retroactively declared to be confusing by Al Gore's campaign chairman William Daley. This ballot was not only approved by Democrats in Palm Beach County, but is also the same ballot used in Mr. Daley's native Cook County, Illinois. (Remember Cook County? It was there that Mr. Daley's father, Mayor Richard J. Daley of Chicago, played such a notorious role in "getting out the vote" for JFK in 1960.) No matter. Now Palm Beach County officials are demanding a hand recount of the entire county, some 425,000 ballots. Inspectors have not only been counting votes, mind you, they have also been scrutinizing ballots for "voter intent": determining that *this* half-punched ballot should count while *that* half-punched ballot should not. (As Stalin remarked, "it's not who's casting the vote, it's who's *counting* it.") Other close states—there are several—may also be subject to recounts. No one knows how long such a process would take.

What we do know, however, is that Election 2000 is shaping up to be one of the most fateful in the annals of American history. Not only is it probably the closest race ever, it has also been among the most bitter. The almost even division of the electorate

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

reveals a deep and troubling fissure in our society. Along the fault-line of that fissure stand two increasingly different conceptions of American society: of who we are and what we should be. The difference, as the political commentator David Frum noted in Canada's *National Post*, is "not class. . . . It's values. One-quarter of American voters said that the most important thing to consider when voting for a candidate was whether he was honest. They voted 80 percent for Bush. One-eighth of the electorate said that the most important thing was whether he 'cares.' They voted 83 percent for Gore."

The statistics that Mr. Frum marshals reveal the fundamental nature of the "values gulf" that divides contemporary America. Bush beat Gore among married people with children by a margin of 56–41; he beat Gore among those who attend church weekly by 57–40. Traditionally, middle-class voters have been thought to vote disproportionately for Democratic candidates. But in this election, Mr. Frum notes,

> voters who described themselves as "middle class" preferred Bush 49–48. Democrats are the party of the highly educated: people with postgraduate education preferred Gore to Bush 52–44. They are the party of working women (58–39) and of those who do not have children in the home (50–46).
>
> Democrats are the party of the secular: People who "never" attend church backed Gore 61–32. They are the party of the unarmed. Half of Americans own guns and half do not. The half who own them voted for Bush 61–36. The half who do not voted for Gore 58–39. Above all, they are the party of permissive sex. Seventy percent of Americans who believe that abortion should be legal under all circumstances backed Gore, as did 70 percent of self-described gays, lesbians and bisexuals.

No matter who emerges as president, the outcome of this election, as Mr. Frum observes, is "as troubling as it is unprecedented." For not only does it reveal America to be a nation divided against itself about moral values, but it also highlights an equally troubling rift about fundamental political principles. As we write, it appears that George W. Bush might win the electoral vote while losing the popular vote to Al Gore by a slim margin. No sooner did that possibility arise than prominent liberals across the country—including the new senator-elect from New York, Hillary Rodham Clinton—called for the elimination of the Electoral College and the institution of election by pure popular vote. "We are a very different country than we were two-hundred years ago," she said. "I believe strongly that in a democracy, we should respect the will of the people and to me, that means it's time to do away with the Electoral College and move to the popular election of our president."

The First Lady is hardly the first person to call for the abolition of the Electoral College. Proponents of extreme, as distinct from representative, democracy have always been against it. Over the course of our history, there have been no fewer than seven-hundred proposals in Congress to reform or abolish the Electoral College. It is our good fortune that this important guarantor of freedom has so far survived. Proposals to abolish the Electoral College and turn the election of the president over to a simple popular vote is a signal instance of what James Madison warned about in his famous discussion of faction in *The Federalist*. Distinguishing between "pure democracy" and a republic, Madison pointed out that in a pure democracy there is nothing to check or counterbalance "the superior force of an interested and overbearing majority."

> Hence it is that such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> Theoretic politicians, who have patronized this species of government, have erroneously supposed that by reducing mankind to a perfect equality in their political rights, they would, at the same time, be perfectly equalized and assimilated in their possessions, their opinions, and their passions.

We live in an age rife with the sort of "theoretic politicians" Madison conjured up. Now more than ever we need to cherish and protect those mediating institutions that disarm faction and protect us from the tyranny of the majority. As Alexander Hamilton pointed out later in *The Federalist*, entrusting the election of the president to a small body of electors would "afford as little opportunity as possible to tumult and disorder." Tumult and disorder, Hamilton continues, were

> not least to be dreaded in the election of a magistrate, who was to have so important an agency in the administration of the government as the President of the United States. But the precautions which have been so happily concerted in the system under consideration, promise an effectual security against this mischief. The choice of SEVERAL, to form an intermediate body of electors, will be much less apt to convulse the community with any extraordinary or violent movements, than the choice of ONE who was himself to be the final object of the public wishes. And as the electors, chosen in each State, are to assemble and vote in the State in which they are chosen, this detached and divided situation will expose them much less to heats and ferments, which might be communicated from them to the people, than if they were all to be convened at one time, in one place.

The authors of *The Federalist* and the other founding fathers painstakingly contrived a system of government that combined the advantages of democracy—equality, majority rule—with effective protections against its deficiencies—faction, "mobocracy," political paralysis. They did this through a careful architecture of effective checks and balances. Over the last several decades we have seen the power of many of those checks and balances falter. Above all, perhaps, we have seen the power of the judiciary grow in relation to the other branches of government. As more and more elements of our political life are handed over to the courts for disposition, the will of the people is more and more frustrated by a cadre of elites bearing writs and backed up by teams of lawyers. It is an ominous sign, we think, that the presidential contest in Florida should already have become enmeshed in a web of law suits. As of this writing, the Gore campaign has filed at least eight law suits to challenge the results of the election, while the Bush campaign has asked for an injunction against the hand recount of ballots in Palm Beach County.

By the time you read this, the next American president may well have been chosen. Whether it can also be said that he was duly elected is a matter that, as of this writing, is impossible to predict. The Long March through the institutions of American life, which began as a protest movement by radicals in the 1960s, has now established itself in the mainstream of American life. The values of that march have insinuated themselves into our schools, our media, our family life, our churches, our foundations and business world, and our cultural institutions. It seems increasingly likely that they have even penetrated the electoral process. In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville, warning against the tyranny of the majority, wrote that "justice . . . forms the boundary of each people's right." What he meant was that majority rule has its measure in an ideal of justice that transcends the majority. Respecting that measure is what rescues us from democratic despotism. Tocqueville wrote in the 1830s—close to that two-hundred years that Hillary Clinton so cavalierly dismissed. It remains to be seen whether we still have ears to hear his admonition and the will to act with due discretion upon its message.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Plutarch & the issue of character

by Roger Kimball

What Histories can be found . . . that please and instruct like the Lives of Plutarch? *. . . I am of the same Opinion with that Author, who said, that if he was constrained to fling all the Books of the Antients into the Sea,* PLUTARCH *should be the last drowned.*
—Montesquieu, quoted by Oliver Goldsmith

Using history as a mirror I try by whatever means I can to improve my own life and to model it by the standard of all that is best in those whose lives I write. As a result I feel as though I were conversing and indeed living with them; by means of history I receive each one of them in turn, welcome and entertain them as guests and consider their stature and their qualities and select from their actions the most authoritative and the best with a view to getting to know them. What greater pleasure could one enjoy than this or what more efficacious in improving one's own character?
—Plutarch, life of Timoleon

Like all ancient authors today, Plutarch is at best a name to most people, even—especially?—to most college-educated people. You, dear reader, are of a select group, because you know that Plutarch (*c.* 46–*c.* 120) was a Greek biographer and moral philosopher who wrote, among other things, a famous series of "parallel lives" comparing various Greek and Roman figures. Perhaps, like me, you first learned about Plutarch from reading the notes to *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Timon of Athens*, or *Coriolanus*, the four plays for whose plots Shakespeare drew heavily upon the then-recently translated Plutarch. Perhaps you also, like me, dipped casually into the odd volume of Plutarch now and again, to find out more about Pericles, Cicero, Alexander the Great, or some other antique worthy. Probably, like me, you left it at that.

Literary fashion is a mysterious thing. Why is it that Sir Walter Scott, for example, whom generations of readers found absolutely spellbinding, is unread and, for many of us, unreadable today? Why is it that the Renaissance Italian poet Tasso, who fired imaginations from Milton and Dryden to Shelley, Byron, and Goethe, should now subsist as a decoration in scholarly footnotes instead of as a living presence? Why is it that Plutarch—"for centuries Europe's schoolmaster," as the classicist C. J. Gianakaris put it—should quite suddenly move from center stage to the mental off-off-Broadway of reference books and dissertations? If Plutarch, in Sir Paul Harvey's words, is "one of the most attractive of ancient authors, writing with charm, geniality, and tact, so as always to interest the reader," why does he no longer interest *us*?

Doubtless there are many reasons: the shelf life of novelty, competing attractions, educational atrophy, the temper of the age. It seems clear, at any rate, that wholesale changes of taste are never *merely* matters of taste. They token a larger metamorphosis: new eyes, new ears, a new scale of values

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and literary-philosophical assumptions. It is part of the baffling cruelty of fashion to render mute what only yesterday spoke with such extraordinary force and persuasiveness. It is part of the task of criticism to reanimate those voices, to provide that peculiar medium through which they might seem to speak in the way their best, their most ardent hearers understood them.

Plutarch's best hearers form a distinguished but exceedingly various group. Erasmus, resonating to Plutarch's urbane humanism, translated and broadcast his work. Henri IV of France, in a letter to his wife, wrote that "Plutarch always delights me with a fresh novelty. To love him is to love me; for he has long been the instructor of my youth. . . . [Plutarch's writing] has been like my conscience, and has whispered in my ear many good suggestions and maxims for my conduct." Shakespeare, Sidney, Ben Jonson, Dryden, Milton, and Bacon learned and freely borrowed from him, as did Shaftesbury, Winckelmann, Lessing, Hume, and Addison. ("Plutarch," Addison wrote, "has more strokes of good nature in his writing than I remember in any author.") The nineteenth-century French critic Brunetière argued that what Homer was to the Greek tragedians, Plutarch was to the classical French dramatists. Cotton Mather proclaimed Plutarch necessary reading for "a person of good sense." Browning drew on his life of the Athenian general Nicias for "Balaustion's Adventure," Wordsworth on his depiction of the death of Dion for his poem of that name. Emerson adulated him, as, alas, did Rousseau, who started to read Plutarch when he was six. (The life of Lycurgus, the man who made Sparta spartan, made an especially deep impression on Rousseau.) Boswell, who quoted a few lines from Plutarch's life of Alexander toward the beginning of his *Life of Johnson*, called him "the Prince of ancient biographers." And Montaigne, to end this catalogue of ships, is inconceivable without the example of Plutarch. His essays, which contain more than four-hundred references to Plutarch and his works, are consciously modelled on the Greek's easygoing, discursive inquiries into science, manners, customs, and beliefs. "When I write," Montaigne noted in his essay "On Some Verses of Virgil,"

> I prefer to do without the company and remembrance of books, for fear they may interfere with my style. . . . But it is harder for me to do without Plutarch. He is so universal and so full that on all occasions, and however eccentric the subject you have taken up, he makes his way into your work and offers you a liberal hand, inexhaustible in riches and embellishments. It vexes me that I am so greatly exposed to pillage by those who frequent him. I cannot be with him even a little without taking out a drumstick or a wing.

Plutarch's writing divides into essentially three parts. One part is the *Lives*. Extant are twenty-three pairs of lives (including one double pair) and four singletons. Scholars believe that we have between a third and one-half of Plutarch's corpus; missing are not only the companions to the four solo biographies but also the lives of such important figures as Augustus, Claudius, and Nero, and other works. The dual biographies begin, in the traditional order, with the mythological figures of Theseus, supposedly an early king of Athens, and Romulus, the legendary founder of Rome; they conclude with lives of Dion, the philosopher and brother-in-law of the Syracusan tyrant Dionysius, and Brutus. The lives were written late in Plutarch's career, probably between 105–115. His general procedure was to write the life of a prominent Greek, then cast about for a suitable Roman parallel. In the text that we now have, nineteen of the parallel lives end with a brief comparison; probably they all once did.

Some of the comparisons are distinctly more compelling than others. There are obvious parallels between the orators Demosthenes and Cicero, for example, or the conquerors Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. But many of Plutarch's pairings seem arbitrary—or, if that seems too severe,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

let us say merely convenient. One often feels, in any event, that he was more interested in the exhibition than the analysis of character. Reflecting on his task at the beginning of his life of Alexander, Plutarch tells his readers that

> I am not engaged in writing history, but lives. And the most glorious exploits do not always furnish us with the clearest discoveries of virtue or vice in men; sometimes a matter of less moment, an expression or a jest, informs us better of their characters and inclinations, than the most famous sieges, the greatest armaments, or the bloodiest battles. Therefore as portrait-painters are more exact in the lines and features of the face, in which character is seen, than in the other parts of the body, so I must be allowed to give my more particular attention to the marks and indications of the souls of men, and while I endeavor by these to portray their lives, may be free to leave more weighty matters and great battles to be treated by others.

It was the bit about "a matter of less moment, an expression or a jest" that Boswell quoted to help justify his own procedure in dealing with Dr. Johnson. Both biographers rely on the friction of anecdote—the arresting detail, the turn of phrase, the private manner of public men—to elicit the moral bearing of their protagonists.

The second part of Plutarch's work is several volumes of "symposia" or table talk, occasional pieces that he wrote up following spirited after-dinner-party conversations at his home or the homes of friends in Athens, Eleusis, Corinth, Delphi, Thermopylae, Rome, and elsewhere. These bagatelles are usually light, sometimes trivial, but are always entertaining. Plutarch begins by indicating the topic and the speakers—which often included Plutarch himself—who debate it: "Whether it was a good custom to deliberate over wine" (yes); "Whether the hen or the egg came first" (probably the hen); "Why old men hold writing at a greater distance for reading" (he got this one wrong); "Why we take pleasure in hearing actors represent anger and pain but not in seeing people actually experience these emotions" (complicated: you will have to read this one to learn his answer).

Some of the issues raised in the table talk have a distinctly contemporary relevance. Item: "That one should guard especially against the pleasures derived from degenerate music, and how to do so." One of the guests recalls another dinner at which the host provided an elaborate musical entertainment. It seemed a fine performance—"at first."

> But then, shaking the hall and filling it with resounding noise, when [the performer] perceived that most of the auditors were so overwhelmed as to allow him, under the spell of pleasure, to do with them what he pleased and hypnotize them with his piping or even with licentious movements, he cast off all disguise and showed that music can inebriate, more effectively than any wine, those who drink it in as it comes, with no restraint. For the guests were no longer content to shout and clap from their places, but finally most of them leapt up and joined in the dancing, with movements disgraceful for a gentleman, though quite in keeping with that kind of rhythm and melody.

It is a pity that one cannot enlist Plutarch to report on the next big rock concert.

The third part of Plutarch's work consists of somewhat more formal essays, many of which began life as lectures. Like the table-talk, these pieces betray a hearty, somewhat garrulous curiosity. Several are in the form of a dialogue. Begun in the 80s, most were written before Plutarch embarked on the *Lives*. Although today the *Lives* are far and away Plutarch's most popular work—insofar as any of it can still be said to be popular—at one time his essays exercised a nearly equal claim to attention. Many bear dedications to Plutarch's friends; some were written on request for guidance or information. They range over a wide number of topics, moral, cosmological, etymological,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hortatory, and numerological. There are treatises on love, on education, on whether animals have reason, on superstition, on Plato's philosophy, on Stoicism, on Epicureanism. (Plutarch was sound on Epicurus, as you can tell from this title: "You Cannot Live a Happy Life if You Follow Epicurus.")

Although generally moderate in tone, Plutarch could be a severe critic. In "On Herodotus' Spite," which has been called the "first instance in literature of the slashing review," he takes the historian to task for all manner of prejudice and misrepresentation. He makes some palpable hits, catching Herodotus out in various errors. But as the Plutarch scholar R. H. Barrow observed, Herodotus' real failing in Plutarch's eyes was to advance any criticism at all of those states that saved Greece from Persia. "Plutarch," he concluded, "is fanatically biased in favor of the Greek cities; they can do no wrong."

Plutarch does not often wander into purely literary terrain, but when he does he lets you know where he stands. In the fragmentary "Comparison of Aristophanes and Menander," he clearly awards the palm to the decorous New Comedy of Menander. "The witticisms of Aristophanes," he wrote,

> are bitter and rough and possess a sharpness which wounds and bites. And I do not know wherein his vaunted cleverness resides, whether in his words or his characters. Certainly even whatever he imitates he makes worse; for with him roguishness is not urbane but malicious, rusticity is not simple but silly, facetiousness not playful but ridiculous, and love not joyful but licentious.

Menander, by contrast, is said to bring us a "polished diction" whose ingredients are "mingled into . . . [a] consistent whole." (It is hard for us to judge, since we have only fragments of Menander's work.)

Some of Plutarch's essays sound a more personal note. There is, for example, a touching letter of consolation to his wife on the occasion of the death of their only daughter. Plutarch also had some useful things to say about how one can distinguish between a flatterer and a genuine friend (for one thing, a true friend is willing to disagree and criticize one) and how to turn the hatred of others to good account (like fire, the enmity of others keeps one alert and on one's toes). The single longest essay is devoted to the Egyptian gods Isis and Osiris, an historical-anthropological work full of arcane information and conjecture and still often referred to by Egyptologists.

Plutarch's essays and table-talk are published together and are generally known by their Latin title, *Moralia*, "moral matters." As for translations, there were early on various translations into Latin (by the Italian humanist Guarinus, for example). But the person who really brought Plutarch to Western Europe was Jacques Amyot, who published a French translation of the *Lives* in 1559 and *Moralia* in 1572. Amyot's translations swept educated Europe. In a way, they made as deep an impression in England as France, for Thomas North, who published an English translation of the *Lives* in 1579, based his work not on Plutarch's Greek but on Amyot's French. It was North's Plutarch that Shakespeare, for example, absorbed and refigured to such happy effect. Here is Plutarch, in North's translation, on Antony's first glimpse of Cleopatra:

> [S]he disdained to set forward otherwise, but to take her barge in the river of Cydnus, the poop whereof was of gold, the sails of purple, and the oars of silver, which kept stroke in rowing after the sound of the music of flutes, howboys, citherns, viols, and such other instruments as they played upon the barge. And now for the person of herself: she was laid under a pavilion of cloth of gold of tissue, apparelled and attired like the goddess Venus commonly drawn in picture; and hard by her, on either hand of her, pretty fair boys apparelled as painters do set forth Cupid, with little fans in their hands, with the which they fanned wind upon her.

And here is Shakespeare:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne,
> Burned on the water; the poop was beaten
> gold,
> Purple the sails, and so perfumed, that
> The winds were love-sick with them, the
> oars were silver
> Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke,
> and made
> The water which they beat to follow faster,
> As amorous of their stroke. For her own
> person,
> It beggared all description; she did lie
> In her pavilion—cloth-of-gold of tissue—
> O'er-picturing that Venus where we see
> The fancy outwork nature; on each side her
> Stood pretty dimpled boys, like
> smiling Cupids,
> With divers-coloured fans, whose wind
> did seem
> To glow the delicate cheeks which they
> did cool.

And so on.

North's translation was more inspirational than accurate. In 1683, John Dryden began a life of Plutarch and oversaw a translation of the *Lives* by several hands and based on the original Greek. This translation has been reworked and revised several times, most recently in the nineteenth century by the English poet and classicist Arthur Hugh Clough. There have been other translations of the *Lives*, but Clough's edition remains the handiest complete edition.[1]

It is a curious irony that Plutarch, who expended so much energy bringing other people to life in his biographies, should himself remain a somewhat shadowy figure. We have some of the standard externals. We know that he was born to a prominent family in Chaeronea, Boetia, a town about twenty miles east of Delphi. He studied philosophy in Athens and emerged a worldly and undoctrinaire Platonist. Like Plato, he believed that to know the good was tantamount to following it. That is one reason Plutarch is often described as "naïve"—a diminishing adjective that, like "charming," one finds regularly employed to describe him. Identifying evil with ignorance, Platonists unwittingly discount the reality of sin. (As Coleridge observed, sin consists in seeing the good, understanding it, and choosing evil anyway.) But Plutarch did not share Plato's systematizing ambitions or his contempt for the flesh. He entertained often. He was happily married—his wife, Timoxena, peeks glancingly through at us from his table talk, a dignified, hospitable presence—and had at least five children.

Plutarch was officially critical of Stoicism, but the scholar who refers to his "recessive stoicism," "poised between the pessimism of stoicism and the optimism of humanism," has it about right. He was above all a proud, civic-minded Greek at a time when Greek power was definitively eclipsed by Rome. Historical marker: Plutarch wrote most of his work during the reigns of Domitian (81–96), Nerva (96–98), and Trajan (98–117); his contemporaries writing in Rome included Tacitus, Martial, Pliny the Younger, and Juvenal. If there is a current of pathos in Plutarch, it has to do with the recognition that his world—the world of the Greek gods and Hellenic culture—had declined into a sort of posthumous existence. What were living realities to him in his relative backwater had long since become museum pieces to the world at large. As Sir Paul Harvey observed, much of Plutarch's work was "an attempt to satisfy the demand for moral guidance in an age of

1 I believe that the only complete edition of Plutarch's *Moralia* available in English is in the indispensable Loeb Classical Library, published by Harvard University Press. Most of the translations—the work of several hands—were done between the 1930s and the 1960s. The Loeb *Moralia* fills sixteen volumes, costs $19.95 per volume, and like all Loebs provides the original text with an English translation *en face*. There is also a Loeb edition of the *Lives*, translated by Bernadotte Perrin in the 1910s and 1920s, in eleven volumes at $19.95 each. Clough's revision of the Dryden translation of the *Lives* is available in two volumes from The Modern Library at $21 each.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

reaction against the decadence of the Roman world, when the faith in the old gods and philosophies was failing."

Plutarch himself helped to extend that spiritual autumn by serving for many years as a priest at the Delphic Oracle. Delphi, as one commentator noted, was "almost a second home to Plutarch." His interventions helped to restore the oracle's outward fortunes for a time. Although his own commitment seems never to have wavered, there are many suggestions that he understood he was tending a guttering flame. "The power comes from the gods and demigods," he wrote at the end of his essay "On the Obsolescence of the Oracles," "but, for all that, it is not unfailing nor imperishable, nor ageless." Still, Plutarch's life and writings continually bore witness to the famous maxims inscribed at Delphi: "Know Thyself" and "Avoid Extremes."

Plutarch traveled extensively. A long trip to Alexandria stocked his mind with material for his monograph on Isis and Osiris. He was clearly in Rome, though how often and for how long is not known. His knowledge of Roman literature was poor; he acknowledges in his life of Demosthenes that he did not know much Latin until he was "well into middle age." He never mentions Ovid or Virgil; when he cites a passage from Horace, it is in a Greek translation. Nevertheless, Plutarch's lectures in Rome were popular—so popular, indeed, that his friend Sosius Senecio, to whom the *Lives* are dedicated, seems to have procured him an honorary Roman citizenship from Trajan. Many ancient sources—Plutarch's works prominent among them—provide a tolerably detailed picture of the stage set upon which Plutarch performed. What we are missing, by and large, is the actor himself. Plutarch exists as a genial but disembodied authorial presence, a courteous ghost. Over the centuries, there have been several lives of Plutarch, but nothing that gives us a Plutarch's life of Plutarch.

It is pretty clear that Plutarch regarded himself first of all as a philosopher. But posterity has tended to regard him rather as a kind of moral compendium: a repository of vivid characters, arresting anecdotes, dramatically engaging conflicts—the drumsticks and wings to which Montaigne refers. R. H. Barrow is right that Plutarch, although deeply immersed in Greek philosophy,

> originated nothing. His mind was not adventurous; it did not use its accumulated knowledge as a springboard to make a leap; it may have lacked imagination. Yet in one particular realm Plutarch was a man of genius. For he had a supreme gift of sensitiveness to religious and moral values which was acutely alive to inconsistency and was profoundly disturbed by it. It would be wrong to say that this sensitiveness issued in a passion for truth; for 'truth' is apt to be lifted to a metaphysical plane. Plutarch's mind worked on lower levels. It would be better therefore to say that he had a passion for sincerity, and was able to discriminate values with precision and delicacy.

Clough, in the introduction he provided to his edition of the lives, made a kindred point.

> In reading Plutarch the following points should be remembered. He is a moralist rather than an historian. His interest is less for politics and the changes of empires, and much more for personal character and individual actions and motives to action; duty performed and rewarded; arrogance chastised, hasty anger corrected; humanity, fair dealing, and generosity triumphing in the visible, or relying on the invisible world.

In short, Plutarch regarded history as a moral theater whose performances it was his task to recapitulate for the edification of himself and his readers. Considered as a "mirror" for the soul (as Plutarch says in his life of Timoleon), history provided a series of cautionary tales, of virtue compromised and virtue salvaged.

Plutarch did not go in for salacious details about his subjects as, for example, did his younger Roman contemporary Sue-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tonius (*c.* 70–*c.* 160) in his *Lives of the Caesars*. But his biographies, though sometimes rambling, are nonetheless powerfully entertaining and informative. How could they fail to be? Plutarch had assembled some of the most extraordinary personalities of antiquity, and he endeavored to portray not so much what they did but who they were.

Consider Alcibiades, one of the most gifted and treacherous figures in history. The Roman biographer Cornelius Nepos (*c.* 99–*c.* 24 B.C.—Plutarch knew some of his work) begins his chapter on Alcibiades by noting that "it is agreed by all who have written his biography that he was never excelled either in faults or in virtues." Immensely rich, he was also widely reckoned the handsomest man of his times. A skilled orator, he seemed to be able to talk his way out of, or into, anything. Alcibiades was also a military genius of sorts: as able leading an army as commanding a naval assault. If, like Emma Woodhouse, he was "handsome, clever, and rich," he was unlike that heroine in that his vanity and hubris were never checked. Chameleon-like, he *displayed* character without ever possessing one. "At Sparta," Plutarch tells us, "he was devoted to athletic exercises, was frugal and reserved; in Ionia, luxurious, gay, and indolent; in Thrace, always drinking; in Thessaly, ever on horseback; and when he lived with Tissaphernes the Persian satrap, he exceeded the Persians themselves in magnificence and pomp."

Educated in part by Pericles, Alcibiades (as readers of Plato's *Symposium* will remember) became an intimate of Socrates. Boundless narcissism combined with extravagant gifts of fortune made Alcibiades a prodigy of ambition. When he decided to enter public life, Plutarch notes, "his noble birth, his riches, the personal courage he had shown in many battles, and the multitude of his friends and dependents, threw open, so to say, the folding-doors for his admittance." During the Peloponnesian War, he was one of Athens's greatest assets; he was also her most horrible liability. It was Alcibiades who helped destroy the so-called Peace of Nicias and masterminded the disastrous Sicilian Expedition. He undertook the risky expedition solely for his own greater glory; its failure would eventually cost Athens her empire.

"Traitor" does not encompass Alcibiades' perfidy. Virtually on the eve of the Athenian fleet's departure to Sicily, many sacred statues were mutilated in Athens. It is likely that Alcibiades, on a drunken rampage with friends, was guilty of the outrage. He was allowed to set sail, but was later called back to Athens to stand trial. He then went over to Sparta. Learning that his property had been confiscated and that he had been condemned *in absentia* to die, he remarked: "I will make them feel I am alive." As indeed he did. For his advice to the Spartan forces was directly responsible for the defeat of Athens in Sicily. Probably the Spartans would never have completely trusted Alcibiades, but he sealed his fate with them by seducing the wife of a Spartan general and having a son by her. He then fled to Sardis where he was taken in by Tissaphernes. In short order, he betrayed him as well. Briefly imprisoned, he managed to escape and offered his services once again to Athens as the war dragged on. He won some brilliant victories for his native city. But the end came after his good advice was ignored by the Athenian commander at Aegospotami. The Athenian fleet was utterly destroyed and Athens was at the mercy of Sparta. Alcibiades fled to Phrygia, but a Spartan condemnation followed him. The assassins did not dare confront him face to face. But one night as he lay sleeping with a mistress—"a young lady of a noble house," Plutarch comments, "whom he had debauched"—he woke to find his house on fire. He managed to escape, but was felled by a cataract of darts and arrows.

I have always been surprised that more is not made of Alcibiades today. He seems the perfect contemporary hero: rich, handsome, brilliant, amoral; he had it all. He was even bisexual, virtually a prerequisite for appear-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing well-rounded these days. Plutarch notes that when it came to "temperance, continence, and probity," Alcibiades must be judged "the least scrupulous and most entirely careless of human beings." But he forgives him a lot, not least because "he was often of service to Athens, both as a soldier and a commander."

In fact, Plutarch nearly always attempted to accentuate the positive. Again and again he stresses that his overriding purpose is to edify. In his life of Demetrius, one of the bad hats who scrambled for power after the death of Alexander the Great, Plutarch acknowledges that evil men must be discussed—not for themselves but because "we shall be all the more eager to watch and imitate the lives of the good if we are not left without a description of what is mean and reprehensible." In general, it was Plutarch's policy either to winnow out what was disreputable or to surround it with exculpating extenuations. Since, he writes in his life of the Athenian commander Cimon,

> it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to exhibit a life which is blameless and pure, . . . we must select its good elements and in these we must satisfy truth and present a likeness. The shortcomings and faults which run through a man's conduct owing to individual passion or political necessity we should regard rather as the defects of goodness than the misdeeds of wickedness; these our narrative should not display eagerly or gratuitously; rather it should show restraint out of regard for human nature, which produces nothing of unalloyed nobility, no character beyond the criticism of goodness.

Plutarch pursued this high-minded procedure not out of primness or timidity but because he thought it the most effective propaganda for virtue. There is something about the display of virtuous character, Plutarch believed, that inspires emulation. In a famous passage in his life of Pericles, Plutarch notes that there are many things which we admire that we do not seek to imitate or emulate. When it comes to "perfumes and purple dyes," for example, we may be "taken with the things themselves well enough, but we do not think dyers and perfumers otherwise than low and sordid people." The fact that we admire a statue by Phidias does not mean that we admire Phidias himself. But the spectacle of virtue in action is different. The "bare statement of virtuous actions," Plutarch wrote,

> can so affect men's minds as to create at once both admiration of the things done and desire to imitate the doers of them. The goods of fortune we would possess and would enjoy; those of virtue we long to practice and exercise: we are content to receive the former from others, the latter we wish others to experience from us. Moral good is a practical stimulus; it is no sooner seen, than it inspires an impulse to practice.

We moderns, of course, chalk up Plutarch's belief in the magnetic properties of the moral good to his "charming naïveté." It is curious that today we are much more apt to emulate what pleases us than what we approve. Hence it is that the contemporary equivalents of Plutarch's perfumers and dyers are among our most prominent culture heroes, as of course are celebrity artists of all sorts. What does this change tell us about ourselves? What does it mean that a rock star or television personality is adulated by millions? The issue of character, in both senses of "issue," was at the heart of Plutarch's teaching. It was also at the heart of Western culture for the centuries in which Plutarch was accounted an indispensable guide. Countless people turned to Plutarch not only for entertainment but also for moral intelligence. He was, as one scholar put it, "simply one of the most influential writers who ever lived," not because of his art but because of the dignity he portrayed. We have lost our taste for that species of nobility. To an extraordinary extent, character has ceased to impress us. Which is one reason, I believe, that Plutarch and the humanity he championed have become increasingly inaccessible.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Longfellow & the fate of modern poetry

by John Derbyshire

Strolling around Disneyland this summer, re-acquainting myself with Peter Pan, Winnie the Pooh, Mister Toad, Simba, and so on, the following reflection occurred to me: that these strange imagined characters were originally (at one slight remove, in Simba's case) the creations of some very bourgeois persons. Barrie, Grahame, Milne, and Kipling were conventional, sober, uxorious, well-dressed gentlemen of respectable employment and opinions, yet the fruits of their imaginations have proved far more durable than those of any bohemian counterculture you can name. Not a very original reflection, to be sure, but it is something to be able to reflect at all while heading from Fantasyland to Adventureland in ninety-degree heat with a first-grader and a preschooler in tow.

Some similar thoughts came to mind as I was reading the new selection of Longfellow's works recently published by the Library of America.[1] Longfellow was as respectable as it is possible for a man to be. Writing and public lecturing apart, his entire paid employment consisted of five-and-a-half years teaching modern languages at Bowdoin and seventeen years teaching the same at Harvard. He had two wives, both of whom he adored, both of whom predeceased him. We know of no other liaisons involving physical intimacy, and on both internal and external evidence, it is extremely unlikely that any such connections existed. He was raised in a happy family and begat another, was a filial son and a loving father. He had only the feeblest interest in politics, and never stood for any office. As best I have been able to determine, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow never broke the law, never got drunk, never discharged a firearm or socked anybody on the jaw in anger, never played at cards for money or speculated on the stock market, never betrayed a friend or made a pass at another man's wife.

Nor is it in the least probable that this outward sobriety was a lid clamped on some raging inner turmoil. I spoke of internal evidence for Longfellow's character—that is, his own writings, letters, recorded talk and private journals. These are plentiful throughout his life, from a letter written at age six to his father to journal entries a few days before his death. There is nothing in them to suggest any quirks of personality more extraordinary than a mild and occasional hypochondria. (Longfellow died of peritonitis at age seventy-five, declining from good health to death in just five days.)

It is therefore not very surprising that literary critics in present-day academia, obsessed as they are with the "transgressive," do not find much of interest in Longfellow's life. There is no scholarly English-language biography of the poet in print, nor has there

1 *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: Poems and Other Writings*, edited by J. D. McClatchy; The Library of America, 875 pages, $35.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

been for decades. A list of materials one might recommend to a non-specialist inquirer into Longfellow's life and work would look very much the same now as it did thirty years ago. At its head I should put Professor Edward Wagenknecht's 1966 sketch, *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: Portrait of an American Humanist*. (For those who are amused by such oddities, I note that the last word in the title is misprinted as "Humorist" in the notes to Mr. Paul Johnson's *A History of the American People*.) Wagenknecht had a gift for encompassing literary personalities in a couple of hundred pages; he did the same service for Poe, Hawthorne, Irving, and other nineteenth-century American authors. Some civic-spirited publisher could do a service to literature by bringing out a uniform edition of Wagenknecht's little handbooks. Newton Arvin's 1962 *Longfellow: His Life and Work* has more critical depth so far as the works are concerned, and the *Life* by Longfellow's youngest brother, Samuel, gives as much as any non-academic would want to read of the poet's journals and correspondence.

As with the life, so with the verse. Drop Longfellow into a literary conversation nowadays and you will get some odd looks. The exchanges that follow will include words and phrases like "mawkish," "shallow," "trite," "mechanical," "unadventurous," "tame," "jingles," "slave to conventional modes and diction," "the innocence of America's literary youth," and so on. When I produced my own CD of readings from American poetry in 1999, I included more pieces from Longfellow than from any other poet. This, a number of people have told me, was a serious error of judgment. "*Four* poems by Longfellow," scolded one lady indignantly, "and not one from Vachel Lindsay?" A friend who teaches English in an excellent suburban high school tells me that Longfellow is not on the curriculum. So far as the literary authorities of our time are concerned, Longfellow is not merely a dead poet, he is a *dead* dead poet.

For all that, Longfellow has been a continuous presence in our language since *Voices of the Night* was published in 1839, and his lines are still familiar today, though many who know them could not tell you who wrote them. "I shot an arrow into the air"; "Under a spreading chestnut tree"; "A banner with the strange device"; "Ships that pass in the night"; "One, if by land, and two, if by sea"; "Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small." No other American poet has so penetrated the general consciousness of the entire English-speaking world. And, whatever our literary clerisy may feel, he is still with us.

Item: My wife and I arrived early one afternoon for our ballroom dancing lesson. Our instructor, a thoughtful, well-educated man of about thirty-five, was attempting to teach some basic steps to a class of girls from the local high school, who seemed more interested in giggling and shrieking. When it was over he came to sit with us and, with obvious relief, watched the schoolgirls leave. As the door closed behind the last of them he turned to us with an expression of mock desperation and recited through clenched teeth the first stanza of "The Children's Hour":

> Between the dark and the daylight,
> When night is beginning to lower,
> Comes a pause in the day's occupations,
> That is known as the children's hour.

Item: Reviewing a book by Amitai Etzioni, guru of the "communitarian" movement, for a political magazine a year or so ago, it occurred to me that many of the author's prescriptions depended on our being able to recapture the social habits and attitudes of an earlier time, and that it was unlikely we could do this because, as we say nowadays, the toothpaste is out of the tube. Seeking for an apt way to phrase the thought in context, I recalled some lines from "The Golden Milestone," which served my purpose very well:

> We may build more splendid habitations,
> Fill our rooms with paintings and with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sculptures,
But we cannot
Buy with gold the old associations!

These items bring to mind a word Samuel Longfellow used somewhere in respect of his brother's verse: *serviceable*. You can bring out Longfellow's lines and use them in all kinds of circumstances. He had a knack for expressing commonplace thoughts very memorably.

It is an interesting question why poets of our own time cannot do this. It may be that we have a very limited requirement for such "serviceable" lines and that the nineteenth century supplied all we need. Much more likely, in my opinion, it is because modern poets are intellectuals, who are expected to have some well-turned ideas about form, system, method, and, of course, politics, and that this precludes them from having commonplace thoughts, or from being willing to express such thoughts in verse.

Longfellow was the very opposite of an intellectual. This might seem an odd thing to say about a man who spoke numerous languages and served on the faculty of Harvard University for seventeen years, yet it is certainly true. To anyone immersed in the literary culture of the present day, Longfellow's utter lack of interest in criticism—much less "critical theory"!—or in abstract systems of any kind, must be astounding. "What is the use of writing about books?" he asked in 1850, "excepting so far as to give information to those who cannot get the books themselves?" Oh, dear. Nor was this just writer's pique at negative reviews, which he took in his gentlemanly stride. Of Edgar Allan Poe's often scathing remarks about his work, he said only: "The harshness of his criticisms, I have never attributed to anything but the irritation of a sensitive nature, chafed by some indefinite sense of wrong." (Which also happens to wrap up in one sentence an extraordinary amount of insight into Poe.)

Similarly with religion and politics. Longfellow had the typical middle-class American horror of strong opinions. Though deeply religious, he had no patience with theological doctrine, and probably could not understand it. The author of *Poems on Slavery* was, says Wagenknecht, antislavery but not abolitionist. When he associated with abolitionists he felt "like Alfred among the Danes." There is an entry in his journal that is pertinent here. On November 27, 1861 he records: "George Sumner and Mr. Bakounin to dinner. Mr. B. is a Russian gentleman of education and ability. . . . An interesting man." This was, of course, the great anarchist and revolutionary Mikhail Bakunin, the familiar of Marx, Proudhon, and Alexander Herzen, but what Longfellow found interesting was Bakunin's narration of his adventures and escapades, not—or, at any rate, not worth recording—anything he might have said about class struggle or the specter haunting Europe.

Though Longfellow was an extremely intelligent man—he was Bowdoin's Professor of Modern Languages at age twenty-two—as a creator of verse, he was an idiot savant. The stuff just bubbled up out of him unpredictably. He could not explain it and had no real theory of poetic composition. "The Arrow and the Song" was jotted down one Sunday morning before church; "The Wreck of the *Hesperus*" was written at one sitting. He could not write *vers d'occasion* and usually begged off requests to do so; the elegantly beautiful "Morituri Salutamus" is almost the lone exception. The history of his life as a poet contains strange pauses and spells of sterility; between the ages of nineteen and thirty, usually a poet's prime years, he seems to have produced no verse at all.

The even tenor of Longfellow's life was punctuated by two tragedies: the deaths of his first and second wives. The first of these, awful as it must have seemed at the time (and cold-hearted as it seems to say so, for which I apologize) was the lesser of the two. It occurred in Rotterdam in 1835, while Longfellow was travelling in north Europe to improve his German, prior to taking up the Harvard post. Mary Longfellow suf-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fered a miscarriage and died a few weeks later from a consequent infection. They had been married just over four years. Mary Longfellow was a great beauty, but whether she was the right wife for a man as intensely bookish as Longfellow has been doubted. We cannot know the inner truth of the matter because Longfellow burned her journals after her death, together with love letters the two of them had exchanged. It is possible that Longfellow had found, like Mr. Palmer in *Sense and Sensibility*, that "through some unaccountable bias in favor of beauty, he was the husband of a very silly woman."

Be that as it may, Longfellow's grief cannot be doubted. He was not incapacitated by it, though, and continued his travels in Germany and Switzerland. In that latter country, just eight months after Mary's death, he met and fell in love with Fanny Appleton, who would eventually, after a long and frustrating courtship, become his second wife. Longfellow was, in fact, capable of a certain detachment from his own emotions, like those of us who can remain perfectly clear-headed as to what is going on around us even when seriously drunk. Travelling through the Tyrol in the weeks following Mary's death, he was overwhelmed with sadness, but not so much so as to blame the mountains. Those gloomy impressions arose, he understood, from "my sick soul." Ever the humanist, Longfellow knew man to be the measure of all things. His firm, placid nature could take its own temperature to within a degree or two.

Mary Longfellow's death was within the scope of afflictions one might reasonably expect to suffer in the days before modern medicine. Grief was appropriate, and in this case sincere, but death was all around, and it was unusual in Longfellow's time for anyone to be long derailed by the death of a loved one. (By coincidence, Longfellow's brother-in-law died of typhus two weeks before Mary.) A few years ago I took an elderly female relative for a trip back to her home town in the west midlands of England. In her youth this lady had been in love with a boy who had died suddenly from rheumatic fever. As we drove past a small street of old houses, she sat up against the window and said: "Oh! That's where we went to buy black for Jack Morgan." In England in the 1920s, apparently, every small town had a store where you went to "buy black"—that is, funeral clothes and veils. These were specialty stores, selling nothing else; demand was steady.

The death of Longfellow's second wife was an event of a different order. It might fairly, though again somewhat cruelly, be said that all the misfortune of a normal life was packed into a few moments of July the ninth, 1861. On that day Fanny Longfellow was sitting in the library with her two youngest daughters, ages five and seven, sealing up small envelopes of their curls, which she had just cut off. A match fell on Fanny's light summer dress, which burst into flames. Screaming, Fanny ran into the adjoining study, where her husband was taking a nap. He tried to stifle the flames, using a rug and his own body, but succeeded only after burning himself badly. Fanny died after a night of agony. Longfellow, fifty-four years old, was plunged into an intense grief from which he never truly recovered. It was months before he could even speak of the event, and then only obliquely. At length he took refuge in work, taking up his translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, a task he had begun some years before but laid aside.

These two life events, when they had been completely absorbed, produced two of Longfellow's finest poems. Taking the "water cure" at the German spa of Marienberg in August of 1842, his thoughts turned to the fact of his being half-way through the allotted seventy years of life. These meditations brought forth a wonderful sonnet, "Mezzo Cammin," in which is imbedded a single, brief but unmistakeable reference to Mary, dead nearly seven years at this point:

> But sorrow, and a care that almost killed,
> Kept me from what I may accomplish yet.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The grief that followed Fanny's death was much more massive, and took correspondingly longer to work itself through into art. On the eighteenth anniversary of that death in 1879, Longfellow, alone in his chamber, happened to be looking over an illustrated book of western scenery. The book included a picture of a mountain on whose side the snow lies in two long furrows to make the image of a vast cross. The image stayed with him, and when, that night, sleepless, he gazed at Fanny's portrait on the wall, the two things came together in his last, most heartbreaking sonnet, "The Cross of Snow":

> and soul more white
> Never through martyrdom of fire was led
> To its repose.

(There is a sad little anthology to be made of poems written by men in memory of a dearly loved wife, though perhaps nobody could bear to read it all through. Milton's "Methought I saw my late espoused Saint," leads the field, of course; but Dante Gabriel Rossetti's memorials to Lizzie Siddal are also very fine; as too, from a very different time and place, is Yuan Zhen's "Elegy," of which there is a moving translation in Witter Bynner's *The Jade Mountain*. No doubt there are many others I have forgotten or am ignorant of.)

"Mezzo Cammin" and "The Cross of Snow" illustrate the fact that Longfellow, whom we associate mainly with the ballad and narrative epic, was also a sonneteer of genius. This is not much appreciated. Robert Nye, for example, in his anthology *The Faber Book of Sonnets*, includes only four by Longfellow: "Chaucer," "The Cross of Snow," "Autumn," and "Divina Commedia." This is a disgraceful under-representation — Ezra Pound has six poems in the book! The inclusion of the over-wrought "Autumn" and the omission of "Mezzo Cammin" are both equally inexplicable.

This new Library of America edition includes fifty-two sonnets, if I have not miscounted, and no more than a dozen are duds. All, by the way, are in the Petrarchan form; Longfellow seems not to have attempted the "English" sonnet. The literary ones are quite well-known, I think, at least the ones on Dante and *The Divine Comedy*, and the flawless one on Chaucer: "An old man in a lodge within a park." The one on Shakespeare would be first-rate if Longfellow had not put the word "Musagetes" into the last line, driving everyone except Hellenists and balletomanes to their reference books.

Here are some lines of Longfellow's that you have probably never read. They are not especially distinguished lines, and I choose them for just that reason. They close the finale of "Tales of a Wayside Inn" (which, by the way, is very rewarding to read in its entirety).

> Perchance the living still may look
> Into the pages of this book,
> And see the days of long ago
> Floating and fleeting to and fro,
> As in the well-remembered brook
> They saw the inverted landscape gleam,
> And their own faces like a dream
> Look up upon them from below.

What can we say about these lines, 137 years later? Well, two interesting things: one, that they would still give pleasure to a lot of people, and two, that no poet would think of publishing such lines nowadays.

Here we have bumped up against one of the great conundrums of our time: whatever happened to popular poetry? Longfellow was one of the so-called "fireside poets" of the nineteenth century. Huge numbers of ordinary people all over the English-speaking world read him with great enjoyment. His brother relates the following story from the poet's last visit to England in 1868:

> Upon his arrival the queen sent a graceful message and invited him to Windsor Castle, but he told me no foreign tribute touched him deeper than the words of an English hod-carrier, who came up to the carriage-door at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> Harrow and asked permission to take the hand of the man who had written the *Voices of the Night*.

My own mother, the daughter of an English coal-miner, left school at age fourteen to go into domestic service. Yet she could recite "Excelsior" all the way through, and if she came to my room and found it a mess she would say, "It looks like the wreck of the *Hesperus* in here!"

Why does no American poet later than Frost give such widespread pleasure, or inspire such allegiance from nonliterary people? We are not unwilling to write poetry. Any magazine editor will tell you that the nation teems with poets. Nor are we unwilling to read it. There is a good market for books of poetry. Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* is a bestseller, Amazon sales rank 433. Even current poetry sells well: *The Best American Poetry 2000* has Amazon rank 4,555, a very respectable showing. (Though this needs some discounting, as a book of this sort will be bought up in bulk by schools and colleges.)

And yet, whenever you actually hear someone quote poetry, it is always something old. I feel sure that whole days go by when no mouth anywhere in the United States spontaneously, in a non-pedagogical context, quotes any line from any American poem later than Frost's "Stopping by Woods" (1923). Ask any well-educated, but not particularly literary, friend to quote four lines by a living poet. Now ask your dentist, your mechanic, your plumber. You will be lucky to get anything but blank looks and shrugs.

It is hard to blame the poets. I happen to believe that the Modern Movement was all a ghastly mistake, like Communism, and that, as with Communism, it will take a century or so to clean up the mess. Now, there can be no forgiving Lenin, but what were poets supposed to do—go on turning out copies of "Snow-Bound" or *A Shropshire Lad*? Lapse back into heroic couplets? In art and literature, new things must be tried, old habits challenged, eggs broken in the hope of making omelettes. It is just our bad luck that none of the things tried in the twentieth century worked very well, that the omelettes were all inedible.

In particular, of course, free verse did not work very well. Personally I am not a purist about this, as for example was G. K. Chesterton: "Free verse? You may as well call sleeping in a ditch 'free architecture'!" I think free verse can occasionally be very striking. Any comprehensive anthology of good poetry will include some free-verse pieces (my own CD has 5 percent, which I think is about right). The trouble is that there is far too much of it about, and people have been led to believe that fundamental poetic skills are not very important or even that they are altogether unnecessary.

In the early 1980s I taught a college course in poetry using the second edition (1965) of C. F. Main and Peter Seng's *Wadsworth Handbook and Anthology*, an excellent text for that purpose. I lost the book somewhere on my subsequent travels, but three or four years later decided to buy another copy, and duly did so. By this time the book had advanced to a fourth edition (1978), and I was dismayed to see that the lessons on scansion, which in the second edition were part of the main text, in the fourth had been relegated to an appendix! Probably they have been dropped altogether by now.

Here are some lines from a collection titled *The George Washington Poems*, by Diane Wakoski, published 1967.

> George Washington, your name is on my lips.
> You had a lot of slaves.
> I don't like the idea of slaves. I know I am
> a slave to
> too many masters, already.

If this is poetry, what is not poetry? One thinks of Doctor Johnson's reply when asked if he thought any man could have written Macpherson's *Ossian*: "Yes, Sir, many men, many women, and many children." When an impressionable young per-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

son is told that this is poetry and that the kind of gassy drivel extruded by Maya Angelou at the first Clinton inauguration is also poetry; and when that young person furthermore learns that Ms. Wakoski is actually a full-time professional poet, who makes a decent middle-class living at it, and that Ms. Angelou has even got modestly rich from her vaporings, then that young person's attitude to poetry has been corrupted.

Free verse is not the whole of the problem, though. Even in the coldest depths of the free-verse nuclear winter, around 1970, plenty of dedicated poets were still writing formal, structured verse. Elizabeth Bishop's perfect little villanelle "One Art," for example—sufficiently well-known, at any rate among literary types, to have generated at least one good parody—was written in 1975. Richard Wilbur, John Hollander, and many others produced, and are still producing, verse in traditional forms. The late 1970s in fact saw the birth of the so-called "New Formalism," in which a whole tribe of younger poets committed themselves to working with rhyme, meter, and traditional structures. By the late 1980s these traditionalists had made enough noise to provoke a counter- (perhaps I mean counter-counter-) revolution. The aforementioned Ms. Wakoski's famous broadside "The New Conservatism in American Poetry" (in *American Book Review*, May-June 1986) pretty much said that anyone who wrote formal poetry was a fascist. With Hollander she went further, calling him "Satan." Hollander's own views on the matter, which are irenic and accommodationist, can be inspected in his introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1998*.

Across the pond, formal verse has had more mainstream support. In London, Auberon Waugh's *Literary Review* has for fifteen years been running a monthly poetry competition whose rules stipulate that entries must rhyme, scan, and make sense. The London *Spectator* ceased accepting poetry submissions at all some years ago on the grounds that none of the work submitted was any good; the outcry was, they report, "less than deafening." They have recently reversed this policy. In a stirring editorial in the September 23, 2000 issue, they announced that they had hired a poetry editor. "He has a beard. . . . He knows the difference between a tribrach and a molossus." Their requirements are less strict than Mr. Waugh's, insisting only that poems scan, have an argument, and show decorum. And, of course, *The New Criterion* deserves an honorable mention in this context. Still I doubt any of it will make much difference. I have read the New Formalists with painstaking attention. (*Rebel Angels*, edited by Mark Jarman and David Mason [Story Line Press, 1996], is a representative collection.) I have been a *Literary Review* subscriber since its first issue. I applaud what these poets are doing, and am very glad they are doing it, but I can't remember a line of their stuff, though I have sincerely tried.

Probably the dropping of dead languages from ordinary education is part of the problem. Translation into and out of Greek and Latin provided our forefathers with a gruelling but effective training in the mechanisms of poetry. Kingsley Amis remarks in the introduction to his *Popular Reciter* that as a student in an ordinary English secondary school before World War II he was often assigned such tasks:

> an exercise that gives you an insight hard to achieve by other means: the fact, noted by my fellows and me, that Mrs. Hemans's "Graves of a Household" went into Latin elegiacs with exceptional ease encourages a second look at that superficially superficial piece.

The 1930s seem like an awfully long time ago here. Fifty years earlier, Samuel Longfellow was boasting that the opening words of his brother's "Evangeline" were by then as familiar as "*Μῆνιν ἄειδε, θεά*" or "*Arma virumque cano*." That assertion is, of course, just as true today, though in a depressingly different sense.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The more I think about this, the more I come to believe that there is some great mystery here. It's not anybody's fault; it's just something in the air. Something, undoubtedly, that, if we could understand it, would explain the related fact that when, at random, I switch on a serious music radio station, nine times out of ten the music being played will have been composed before World War I; or that, when I buy an opera on CD, or steel myself to assault the logistical obstacles involved in going to see an opera at Lincoln Center (transport, baby-sitters, getting a ticket), it is never for any work later than *Turandot* (1926).

Whatever the explanation, it is a plain fact that poets like Longfellow attained a breadth and durability of appeal that modern poets, for all their writer-in-residence sinecures and Pulitzer Prizes, can only dream of. A common fixture in American homes of all classes during the middle of the twentieth century was Hazel Felleman's 1936 anthology *The Best Loved Poems of the American People*. Here are all the hoary verses and song lyrics our parents and grandparents knew, of quality high, low and desperate: "Casabianca," "The Sidewalks of New York," "Solitude," and so on. Doubleday has recently reissued the book and it seems to be doing well; the Amazon sales rank is 46,771. This ranking—I believe I am on firm ground in saying this—owes nothing whatever to assistance from our educational institutions.

By way of comparison, here are some other Amazon rankings for poetry: Ezra Pound's *Selected Poems* 59,457, *Rebel Angels* 140,602, Diane Wakoski's *Emerald Ice* 247,201, and Rita Dove's *Grace Notes* 294,335. *The Top 500 Poems*, a popular recent anthology of what it claims to be "the most anthologized poems," ranks 84,437. Its poets are arranged in chronological order by birth date from John Skelton to Sylvia Plath; John Keats falls precisely in the middle of the book, and is therefore the median poet of popular enthusiasm, so far as birth order is concerned. Sylvia Plath was born in 1932.

This new Longfellow edition reminds us that there are smaller losses within the larger. Even more thoroughly than we have lost popular poetry, we have lost narrative poetry. I am sure there must be many people of the older generation who can still recite "The Wreck of the *Hesperus*" or "Paul Revere's Ride," but who now reads the long ones: "Evangeline," "The Courtship of Miles Standish," and "Hiawatha"? If you raise the question, people laugh and say: "Nobody has time for that kind of thing nowadays."

This is just not true. I declaimed "Miles Standish" out loud at a leisurely pace, pausing now and then to look things up, in one hour and twenty-nine minutes—much less time that it takes to watch the average movie. Silent reading would be faster. I am sure that anyone who cared to could get through "Evangeline" in an hour and a quarter. You could probably read both poems in the time it takes to watch *The Patriot* (165 minutes). Even "Hiawatha" could be traversed between dinner and bedtime by anyone who set himself to it.

So why are we all—I include myself here—willing to do the one thing but not the other—watch a 165-minute movie but not, unless paid to do so, read an eighty-nine-minute story in dactylic hexameters? Longfellow's epics are much more authentic than Mel Gibson's—though it is interesting that the portrait of American Indians as seen through white men's eyes in "Miles Standish" is so different from the one in the earlier Indian-viewpoint "Hiawatha." There the Indians are noble savages with a rich oral culture; in the later "Miles Standish" they are treacherous, boastful, and cruel. This latter portrayal accords much better with the accounts we have from people who actually lived among New World aborigines: W. H. Hudson in *Green Mansions*, for example, or the memoirs of Kit Carson. The other is much closer to modern sensibilities. This, however, will not help "Hiawatha" become known again. One knows without trying that any attempt to revive interest in narrative verse would be futile. We do not

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

read as our grandfathers read, we do not hear as they heard.

Much less to be regretted is the change in taste that has made Longfellow's prose unreadable. Perhaps "unreadable" is over-stating things somewhat; as a conscientious reviewer, I actually did read Longfellow's short novel *Kavanagh* all the way through—it is included in its entirety in this Library of America edition. What stuff! I would have been better employed in back-washing my sump pump. Longfellow himself seems to have been aware of his failings as a prose writer, and after *Kavanagh* attempted no more.

I wonder why Mr. McClatchy included the whole of this sorry piece, when he might have given us more of Longfellow's translations. In addition to three page-length extracts from *The Divine Comedy*, he has chosen just twelve poems translated from other languages; twice that number would not have been too many. Longfellow was a gifted linguist. He learned French, Spanish, Italian, and German to a good degree of reading competency—we have independent confirmations of this—in nine, nine, twelve, and six months, respectively, between 1826 and 1829. Much of the rest of his life was devoted to enlarging his knowledge of the literature in these tongues, and in acquiring others. He was a busy and skillful translator of poetry from, by Arvin's count, eleven different languages altogether.

The translating of poetry is an oddly addictive business, as anyone that has tried it will confirm. Longfellow found it intensely stimulating—"Like running a ploughshare through the soil of one's mind," he told his friend Ferdinand Freiligrath—and gave himself over to it with a passion. The results on display in this edition range from a grave and fine-wrought, almost Shakespearean, rendering of one of Michelangelo's sonnets for Vittoria Colonna to the following irresistible little carved cherry-stone titled "A Neapolitan Canzonet."

> One morning, on the sea-shore as I strayed,
> My heart dropped in the sand beside the sea;
> I asked of yonder mariners, who said
> They saw it in thy bosom,—worn by thee.
> And I am come to seek that heart of mine,
> For I have none, and thou, alas! hast two;
> If this be so, dost know what thou shalt do?—
> Still keep my heart, and give me, give me
> thine.

Amongst other reasons for wishing there were more translations here, I note that four of the twelve are love poems, a genre the poet himself ventures into, unaccompanied, just once in the whole of the rest of the book. Longfellow could translate love poetry very effectively, but he could not write it, and seems to have known this. That single solo venture is "The Evening Star," addressed to Fanny shortly after their marriage. It strikes me—I think it must strike any modern reader—as decidedly peculiar.

Setting to one side the small differences of opinion registered above, I believe that Mr. McClatchy and the Library of America have done a fine job with this little volume. We cannot, indeed, buy with gold the old associations, but anyone who cares to settle down with this Longfellow can find some familiar lines in their native habitat, or make the acquaintance of some beautiful sonnets, or perhaps even discover a taste for narrative verse. Longfellow will never again be as much loved, prized, and memorized as he was in 1850, or even 1950; but when you read him at his best—the sonnets and short ballads, the translations, "The Building of the Ship", "A Psalm of Life"—you know that this is the real stuff—"the true, the blushful Hippocrene." The United States has not engendered so many first-rank poets that we can afford to neglect one.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Long walk to nowhere: Nelson Mandela

by Sarah Ruden

What is the matter with this country? If oppression by the West is to blame, why are things getting worse under indigenous rule? AIDS, which had a manageable prevalence in the early Nineties, is now set to kill at least a quarter of the population. The new president, Thabo Mbeki, has responded by questioning whether HIV causes AIDS. Crime has become so routine that to speak of certain areas as dumps for the bodies of raped and strangled children is not a hyperbole. Foreign policy is a long funeral for the country's hopes, with the regime openly seeking advice from Libya, Zimbabwe, and Algeria.

Post-apartheid South Africa looks to me very much like another case of African government. Africans can call me a racist if they feel like it. (The sanction has little meaning where it is applied even to black journalists indicting corruption that starves the black underclass.) African culture does not provide the intellectual means to govern a modern national state. Western values would be useful, but African leaders dismiss (as "the hypocrisy of colonialists") the best ones, those that set limits to the power of individuals.

Even the most appealing of African leaders does this, as I found in reading Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994). Though full of indignation against apartheid, Mandela appears throughout his life devoid of any competence in political science, as opposed to the strategizing necessary to take power. The African National Congress's own Freedom Charter (a bland social-democratic frappé, now melted into a constitution that promises many economic rights in one section and in another makes their enforcement dependent on what the government can afford) concerned him mainly as an occasional defense against prosecutors or critics who were concentrating, as he was, on his attempts to overthrow the government by force.

What would he do once in power? While he was on trial for treason in 1960, after nearly two decades of activism, his political reasoning was that of a student forced to summarize a chapter he has not read: "If democracy would be best expressed by a one-party system then I would examine the proposition very carefully. But if a democracy could best be expressed by a multiparty system, then I would examine that carefully." His assumption was that peace and prosperity under a black government would be automatic. During the Rivonia Trial three years later he said that before the whites had arrived in Africa

> Our people lived peacefully, under the democratic rule of their kings. . . . The land, then the main means of production, belonged to the whole tribe and there was no individual ownership whatsoever. There were no classes, no rich or poor and no exploitation of man by man. All men were free and equal and this was the foundation of government.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This would make an anthropologist in Africa choke on his kudu jerky. In African tribes, women, the young, the low-born, and the poor (cattle ownership is individual and unequal) are rigidly repressed through the chief or king's control of the "ownerless" land. African dictatorship evolved from tribal kingship, which explains a lot.

A Xhosa royal family member and the foster son of a king, Mandela was enchanted with the wealth and prestige of the royal compound. He acknowledges (though mostly obliquely) what chiefs contributed to apartheid: they sold their young men into the mines at a steady clip, devastating black family life and the black rural economy, and were generally willing to sacrifice any item of their people's welfare for help in consolidating their own positions. But the impression Mandela treasures is that these black men were treated deferentially by powerful whites. He attributes the equanimity of the chiefs in council and their tolerance of criticism to "democracy" rather than to their ownership of decisions by right of blood. They could afford to be gracious. Apparently not even Mandela's disownment and exile as a penalty for fleeing a loveless arranged marriage, and not even his widowed mother's dire poverty in a society that bans women from inheriting, caused him any ambivalence about authoritarian traditions. Instead, Mandela wore a royal leopard-skin *kaross* in the courtroom; he was visibly a king himself.

The book's renown—which has done much to support Mandela's saintly status—depends either on an extraordinarily fatuous audience or on a phony audience that has not explored far into the 768 pages. The story should speak for itself to anyone else, with the omissions—such as Mandela's personal role in planning specific violent acts, and the sources of his impressive wealth—so rudimentary as to be suspicious in themselves.

Mandela's reported world is one of strategy, with the rare ideas only in ludicrously illogical or incomplete forms (examples: "It is the oppressor who defines the nature of the struggle"; "Sabotage, I said, offered the best hope for future race relations"). The cynicism is flabbergasting. Mandela helped take the ANC out of the Votes for All campaign because he was "more concerned with who got the credit than whether the campaign would be successful." He does not correct by any later impressions his soaring admiration for Haile Selassie's "dazzling uniform" and enormous and spiffy honor guard: "I only hoped it was a vision of what lay in the future for my own country." Only concerning his wife Winnie's involvement in the kidnapping and murder of a young boy does he concede, "Political violence also had its tragic side." Did no one read this book before hyping it?

In the narrative, the main workable logic is Mandela's manipulation of different kinds of opposition to apartheid to ensure his own rise to power. From its beginning, apartheid was vulnerable to the disgust of white voters. Dutch-descended Afrikaners humiliated and impoverished by the Boer War wanted racial scapegoats, and mine bosses wanted cheap labor pressured out of African villages. But a loopy fascist like apartheid's main theorist Hendrik Verwoerd, whimpering that it was better to be poor and racially pure than rich and integrated, gave many influential people pause. Apartheid through its Monty Pythonesque bureaucracy was indeed set to impoverish the country generally. If for no other reason than this, white protest was lively during the Fifties, and nothing could have motivated the acceptance of the three-decade clampdown on dissent that followed, except for what the African National Congress came to produce: a violent, Marxist revolutionary movement.

Mandela took up violence not because the Defiance Campaign and the other nonviolent actions of the Fifties failed (as he implausibly claims, citing such iffy disappointments as the lack of mass participation in rural areas), but because they succeeded. The Defiance Campaign sent ANC mem-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bership from 20,000 to 100,000 in only six months. All-importantly for Mandela, however, with this kind of success the ANC could have evolved into an ordinary political party, with members competing for positions in the ordinary ways. Mandela's academic record, one of steady diligence and persistent failure, would not have encouraged him to hope for much consideration. (And in fact when he finally headed the government he showed no statesmanlike gifts except charisma: most of his appointments were terrible, and his policies were misty; under him public agencies began a remarkable decline, which left blacks worse served than under apartheid.) He actually says he feared that Indians and white Communists would dominate the ANC, "in part because of their superior education, experience and training."

Mandela needed to de-democratize the opposition to apartheid to be sure of leading it, and he did this mainly through violence. From calling on a crowd to attack policemen standing passively, to attempting secretly to import arms, he strove from the early Fifties for warfare, long before the rest of the ANC would consider it. He claims eventually to have won permission for a military wing, but it is unlikely that the ANC president Albert Luthuli, a committed pacifist, knew anything about the plan. Luthuli later vehemently denied knowing or approving of it (Mandela writes, in one of his ooziest passages, that Luthuli was senile at the time), but he lived in remote rural exile and could do nothing. By Mandela's own admission, his trip through Africa collecting money and arms, and his terrorist network's activities, had no oversight from the ANC leadership.

The beginning of the terrorism campaign was not, as Mandela claims, "awkward" in its timing: it was a cruel message to Luthuli that his life's work was to be destroyed. On December 16, 1960, the day after Luthuli returned from his Nobel Peace Prize ceremonies, the first bombings happened. Mandela sociopathically remarks how useful Luthuli's Nobel was for the ANC's image. He even had the gall to name the first deployed group of *Umkhonto we Sizwe* ("Spear of the Nation") soldiers the Luthuli Detachment.

While Mandela and a number of his colleagues were in prison, crime (mostly black on black, only sometimes plausibly political) spread under the aegis of the Black Consciousness Movement. As disciples of the liberation theorist Frantz Fanon, the leaders held that violence was good in itself, psychologically liberating for oppressed people. The followers, on all the available evidence, simply liked robbing, raping, and killing. The policy Mandela developed toward BCM adherents in prison was to be friendly and "compliment them on their achievements," with a view to incorporating these young men into the ANC. He plainly saw them as useful in their unrevised ethical state.

ANC cadres on Robben Island called themselves, apparently with straight faces, "The High Organ." This was directed by Mandela, whose orchestration of underground activities within South Africa (the official headquarters of the banned ANC was now in Zambia) may have been extensive. If he was not in command, why did he not simply say so when the government (and other governments) repeatedly asked him to call off ANC violence? He always gave the impression that the decision was his own.

Mandela's insistence on "keeping the pressure on," even in the late Eighties after the main apartheid laws were gone and the need for multiracial elections almost universally acknowledged, made the issue not apartheid but power. Mandela forced the white government to concede to him personally. Negotiation was no ideological preference but simply the next in a series of "tactics."

"Mandela, we can work with you, but not your colleagues," Mandela reports the minister of prisons saying to him several times. This man and others must have known Mandela was the least principled in the ANC hierarchy, the most likely to make a deal including what apartheid officials needed, impunity for all their violations of human

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rights. (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was to be the mechanism.) Mandela, without including his prison comrades, began to talk to the government. He was moved off Robben Island with a small group of comrades, but quickly separated from them. They protested. He went ahead with his private meetings. Then ANC president Oliver Tambo, in Zambia, heard of what was going on and was uncomfortable with Mandela negotiating on the organization's behalf. Mandela went ahead. On and on the talks went, and eventually other ANC officials participated. But Mandela was now the ANC leader by fait accompli. This guaranteed his election as the country's president as soon as Africans could vote. He was not blamed for subjecting his people to three decades of unnecessary mayhem, but was awarded a Nobel Prize and media apotheosis for declaring a truce under conditions extremely favorable to himself. This was, in my view, because Africa had come up with nothing more substantial to feel good about.

In early 1994, I heard Mandela give an electoral campaign speech in Grassy Park, a slum outside Cape Town. For months he had been telling crowds that they had better stop committing crime now. On this day he addressed the economy. Every household would have a washing machine, he said. Men and women were going to share household tasks equally, swapping weeks. Perhaps he was surprised later that things did not happen as he decreed; he never said. But the successor he chose and fostered, Thabo Mbeki, is more open in his opinions about his prerogatives. That he refuses to admit that HIV causes AIDS is puzzling to the West, but quite understandable in African terms. If he admits the reliability of medical authority, he has to submit himself to that authority. He refuses to submit himself to any—not even that of the electorate. He is sympathetic toward Robert Mugabe in his undignified confrontations with ungrateful voters, and his own secret service is investigating a "foreign conspiracy" to nominate an ANC candidate other than himself for the next elections. It is not only a matter of what power does to people once they have it. It is also what they start out convinced it is.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A sideshow of one: Umberto Saba

by Eric Ormsby

Umberto Saba cultivated poetic individuality to such a paradoxical extreme that his poems often read as though written by an anonymous author. Aspiring to be simply "a man among men," he yet found himself lapped in continual ripples of singularity. Perhaps this was one reason why, in Stephen Sartarelli's new translation,[1] he could speak of

> a sudden yearning to be outside
> of myself, to live the life
> of everyone,
> to be like every
> everyday
> man.

In actuality, Saba was a Jew married to an "Aryan" wife in a Catholic country; menaced by both fascists and Nazis, he remained in Italy, often in hiding, throughout the war years. He was a homosexual who reveled in and celebrated conventional married life. A city dweller to his fingertips, he loved the country and barnyard creatures, especially chickens, pigs, and goats, and eulogized them in verse. By profession he was an antiquarian book dealer and yet seems utterly unbookish and not in the least "literary."

Born Umberto Poli in 1883, he took the pen name "Saba," the origin of which is obscure. (For years the inexplicable legend circulated that he chose "saba" because it was the Hebrew word for "bread." It is not —"bread" is *lechem* in Hebrew—and Sartarelli gets it right in his introduction). Saba was a native of Trieste, polyglot and exotic, as much Slav as Latin; nevertheless, in his bored view, it was nothing more than "a city of commerce" where he felt himself to be a perpetual outsider. This did not prevent Saba from longing to bind Trieste irrevocably to Italy and to do so by means of poetry. As a poet he wrote in a mode utterly at variance with the literary fashions of his time. His poetry looks disarmingly simple, and yet Pier Paolo Pasolini could argue that Saba is "the most difficult of contemporary poets" (Saba agreed, proudly calling attention to his *difficili versi*). Relentlessly autobiographical but in no sense confessional, his lyrics aspire to the condition of song. (If the confessional poet aspires to reveal his or her ultimate singularity, however trivial or sordid, Saba by contrast strives to disclose his singular sameness, his fundamental affinity with others.) And it is through song in all its permutations—canzone, canzonette, sonnets, and ballades—that Saba achieved a kind of dog-eared universality. His poems, plain spoken and even lowly, are as melodious as Verdi arias (a comparison he himself was not averse to trumpeting); at times they sound as im-

1 *Songbook: Selected Poems* (321 pages, $16.95) & *History and Chronicle of the Songbook* (249 pages, $13.95), by Umberto Saba, translated by Stephen Sartarelli; The Sheep Meadow Press.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

memorial as those first lyrics in Italian penned at the Sicilian court of Frederick II, where the first stirrings of the *dolce stil nuovo* were felt. But that is an illusion, fostered perhaps by Saba's unostentatious but steadfast immersion in tradition. Saba remains the most puzzling as well as the most inimitable of Italian poets for his poems could have been written by no one else and yet seem to have been written by anyone.

Giacomo Debenedetto, perhaps Saba's shrewdest critic, noted that in the poet's best work "life itself becomes singable" (*"la vita si fa cantabile"*). As example he singled out the lines *"ai giovanetti è bello/ di primavera dormir la mattina."* These two simple lines sing themselves; they could be the refrain of some old folk ballad: "To young men it is lovely/ to sleep on a morning in spring." Saba's great work, composed over a lifetime, is his *Canzoniere*, or "Songbook," and it is full of such felicitous refrains. Through song the poet inserted himself into one of the oldest traditions of Italian poetry and raised the ghost of Petrarch (whose own *Canzoniere* founded the tradition). Vain and self-involved as Saba manifestly was, he turned instinctively to this most stringent of forms and thereby converted the minutiae of his life into a grand opera of the commonplace, with himself as simultaneously lead tenor and reigning diva.

How to translate such a poet into English? We live in an age when most of our poets, to judge from their productions, disdain melody. For this reason, if nothing else, Saba's ideal translator would perhaps be a lyricist. Unfortunately, this is not the only obstacle confronting the translator of Saba. However simply and even plainly his poems come over in English, the Italian originals are almost always highly wrought and depend upon intricate configurations of rhyme—internal, slant or off-rhyme, end-rhyme—as well as such devices as refrains and even a sort of fugal "counterpoint."

Stephen Sartarelli has had the happy idea of rendering a number of the most representative lyrics from the *Songbook* and accompanying these translations with a version of Saba's own eccentric commentary on his life and works, entitled *History and Chronicle of the Songbook*. Saba may be impossible to translate well into English—in this, he is like Verlaine or Heine (whom he otherwise resembles and whose poetry influenced him strongly). Sartarelli grapples bravely but not always successfully with the formidable obstacles; in general, he tends to fail when he strays from the utmost simplicity. For example, in the early poem "After the Silence," Saba, in Sartarelli's version, wrote

> I feel I've been alive so many years,
> I may well have gone forth with Abraham;
> I may have been Faust, and loved
> Margarethe [*sic*].

In the Italian on the facing page (here disfigured by a gross typo in the first line), Saba has written *"che forse con Abramo ho trasmigrato./ Forse fui Faust, e Margharita ho amato."* The effectiveness of the lines depends upon the repeated word *forse* ("perhaps"), but this is not well conveyed by the clumsy "I may well have . . . I may have been." Instead it could simply read:"Maybe with Abraham I emigrated./ Maybe I was Faust and loved Margarete."

Again in the same sonnet, at the close of the octet, Saba writes: *"Io sono vecchio, paurosamente."* Sartarelli translates this as "I am frighteningly old" which is both clumsy to articulate and inaccurate; worse, it ruins the exquisite timing of the adverb. The little pause occasioned by the comma upon which the protracted six-syllable adverb follows is what gives the line its unexpected fillip. And in *paurosamente* itself we seem to hear not only the speaker's dread but the long, slow years that have gone to form it. The line would have been better as "I am old, fearfully so," or, even, "I am old, and full of fear;" "frighteningly" implies that he is scaring others with his age when it is in fact Saba himself who is fearful. These are, to be sure, small matters but upon such

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

small matters good translations, like good poems, depend. Again and again, Sartarelli overlooks or ignores the small but forceful repetitions of such words as *troppo* or *ancora* or *forse* in Saba's lyrics, and yet, these might have been brought over into English to at least some effect. Other characteristic stylistic devices include inversion of word order which Saba employs often to quite dramatic results. Thus, at the end of "Ashes" (another poem whose Italian text is marred by a typo), Saba wrote: "*Muto/ parto dell' ombre per l'immenso impero*" which Sartarelli translates as: "Silent/ I leave for the shadows' vast realm." This is correct but misses the point. Saba's inversion of *dell'ombre per l'immenso impero* gives his line a Latinate, a Virgilian, clangor quite missing from the English. Saba here wants to end on a "classical" note as reverberatory and yet marmoreal as an ancient epitaph, hence the alliteration on *m* and the solemnly Augustan diction. Such inversions occur regularly throughout the *Songbook* and might have served, along with other distinctly Sabean stylistic tics (refrains, fugal voices, etc.), to shore up the fragility of English versions.

Sometimes Sartarelli drops into almost total unintelligibility as in "Sixth Fugue (Canto in 3 Voices)" where he has:

> I know no sweeter thing
> than love; and yet one shrewder
> than you, more fervent as I,
> feel as though born to suffer.

This not only fails as translation, it is hardly even English. In the *History and Chronicle*, where many verses appear, Sartarelli is generally better, though he can still perpetrate a line like "hot cows drink from you in daytime." Hot *cows*? (Simply overheated or "hot to trot"?) True, the Italian says *calde mucche* but . . . These are extreme examples; when Sartarelli's translations fail, it is usually because he has approached the Italian originals for their meaning rather than their form and in Saba, for better or worse, there is almost always minimal significant meaning but much melody. In this he is utterly unlike his compatriots Montale or Ungaretti or Quasimodo (none of whom possessed his musical sense), but very similar, again, to Verlaine, the poet who in my view is his true predecessor; indeed, Verlaine's great line, from his "Art poétique"—"*prends l'éloquence et tords-lui le cou*" ("Take eloquence and wring its neck"), which Sartarelli, in his otherwise excellent introduction, misattributes to Montale—provided Saba with his artistic credo. For in Saba the (literal) homeliness of the subject matter salts a kind of rhetorical facility which could all too easily have become sugary.

Sartarelli does sometimes acquit himself very well, usually in such better-known poems as "The Goat" or the incomparable "To My Wife." In the latter, a poem which Saba, with mischievous glee, tells us deeply offended his wife Lina, he compares her to various barnyard animals, beginning with a hen:

> You are like
> a young white hen,
> with feathers ruffled
> in the wind, who bends her neck
> to drink and scratch the ground
> yet walks with your same slow
> and queenly step,
> proud and puffed up
> as she struts onto the grass.

Saba goes on to compare Lina to a "lanky dog," a "timid rabbit," a swallow and a "far-seeing ant," as well as, more riskily, to a "pregnant heifer." (This last simile should come, like certain television ads, with a warning to fledgling poets: do not try this yourself at home!) The poem, which could have dissolved into grotesque twaddle, instead works beautifully, not only because Saba maintains his tender but uncloying tone throughout, but because he closely and lovingly observes the creatures with which he compares Lina. These are real barnyard critters, unmistakably so, not mere tropes or "poetic" fancies; their presence on the page, homely and improbable as they are, bears

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

witness to his love more eloquently than a thousand d'Annunzian proclamations. To take the heifer by the horns, so to speak, consider how Sartarelli handles the trickiest stanza of this poem:

> You are like a pregnant
> heifer,
> still roaming free and still
> unburdened, frolicsome, in fact,
> who when you stroke her
> bends her neck toward you,
> the skin beneath a tender pink.
> And if sometime you hear her
> moo, so plaintive is the sound
> of it, you tear the grass up from the ground
> and give it to her as a gift.

Sartarelli handles this poem suavely from start to finish, and his translation is a pleasure to read. This is one of Saba's most charming poems, and one of his most discussed. In the *History and Chronicle*, he immodestly notes that "'To My Wife' is the first great poem that the first-time reader of the *Canzoniere* comes across," and he brags further that no one "would dream of omitting" it from any anthology of his works, even if "he certainly wrote more beautiful, more complex, more seductive, perhaps even more perfect poems than this." In his blithe delectation of himself, Saba even goes so ludicrously far as to inform us that "the chicken was almost a sacred animal to Saba." There is something indiscriminate, indeed almost promiscuous, in Saba's egocentrism: he frolics with his successive selves in an onanistic orgy of unfettered self-delight. He loves to cavort but he loves even more to spotlight his own cavorting. He is the fervent barker for a sideshow of one.

This shamelessness, of course, did not prevent him from writing masterpieces; indeed, it probably made them possible. But Saba is at his best, in my opinion, when his own solipsistic self-pleasure washes over to engulf some creature outside of himself who is yet commensurate with, while remaining obdurate to, his immense fascination with himself. In his great poem "The Pig" (which Saba for some unfathomable reason omitted from his final recension of the *Songbook* in 1954), he makes explicit his rather unexpectedly subtle identification with the pig:

> he does not wonder why the farmer's wife,
> who chases the poor thing about the yard,
> wants him nice and fat, well fed as can be.
> Like all life he does not know what purpose
> he will serve when he has reached
> perfection.
> Yet if I look at him and put myself
> inside his skin, I feel the knife cut through
> the flesh, I feel that scream

The wonderful statement in the original, "*Ma io, se riguardando in lui mi metto*," (literally, "But I while gazing put myself in him") exemplifies the kind of bifurcated awareness Saba displays in all his strongest work, for while he puts himself inside the pig he never relinquishes his simultaneous stance as outside observer. His knowledge of the pig's ineluctable future impinges on his warm, almost brotherly identification with the creature itself. The last two lines of the poem build on this instant of identification in the most delicate way: "*Solo in me mette un impetuosa voglia/ di piangere quel suo beato aspetto*." Sartarelli translates this as: "I alone, to see his beatific face,/ feel an overwhelming desire to weep." In the original it is the pig's "beatific face" which "puts into" the poet the desire to weep; the repetition of the inconspicuous verb *mettere* brings the transformation full circle and this is reinforced by the delayed rhyme of *aspetto*, the last word in the poem, with *metto*, six lines before, when the poet first assumes his porcine vantage-point. Such small, shy devices give Saba his great but unassuming mastery, a mastery which alone tempers and makes bearable his gusty braggadocio.

Saba's most famous poem is "The Goat," which begins: "I have spoken to a nanny goat" ("*Ho parlato a una capra*"). Sartarelli translates this, rather nicely, as "I had a conversation with a goat." The "conversation"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

consists at first of the goat's bleat and Saba's joking imitation; the sound of "that monotonous bleat," however, comical and jarring as it is, jolts the poet into what is perhaps his deepest moment of fellow-feeling. In Sartarelli's version, the last three lines read:

> in a goat with a Semitic face
> I heard the cry of every woe on earth,
> every life on earth.

The "Semitic face" of this nanny goat has prompted much comment; as Saba himself noted in the *History and Chronicle of the Songbook*, by some readers he was even accused of anti-Semitism. In reply (speaking of himself as usual in the third person), Saba stated flatly that "in a goat with a Semitic face" is "a predominantly visual line. When Saba came up with it, he was thinking neither in favor of nor against the Jews. It is merely a thumbstroke applied to the clay in shaping a figure."

Another of Sartarelli's successes in handling Saba's thorny simplicity occurs in a lesser known poem entitled "Old Town" (*Città vecchia*), in which the poet extends his sympathy to his fellow humans:

> Here the prostitute, the sailor, the old man
> shouting curses, the woman in a twitter,
> the dragoon eating fritters
> sitting in a store,
> the lovesick adolescent girl
> who wants to be adored,
> all are creatures of this world
> and its reward
> of sorrow; and in them all, and me, there
> moves the Lord.

Sartarelli's translation conveys the percussive and tumbling lines with their music-hall rhymes; even the risky off-rhyme "twitter/fritters/sitting" (which could have been disastrous) works because it sardonically tempers the incipient sentimentality which the poet barely skirts; even better, the rhyme replicates the crescendo of rhymes in the Italian where lowly *friggitore* ("fried fish shop") chimes with lofty *amore* and *dolore*. (How utterly characteristic of Saba—his poetics in a nutshell—to rescue the worn old words "love" and "sorrow" with a serving of fish and chips!)

This poem offers a good example of Sartarelli's strengths and weaknesses as a translator of Saba. Immediately before the above stanza he renders the lines "*io ritrovo, passando, l'infinito/ nell'umiltà*" as "I in passing find eternity/ in wretchedness." This is not merely wrong, it is gratuitously wrong and misses the connotations of the lines. In the word *l'infinito*, which Saba rhymes significantly with *detrito* ("petty flotsam" in Sartarelli's version), he is both alluding to and reproving his great predecessor Leopardi whose poem "L'infinito" is one of the small splendors of Italian literature. Saba is deliberately juxtaposing his vision of infinity, which he finds reflected in human misery all around him and with which he passionately identifies, with Leopardi's solitary and overwhelming glimpse of infinity through a hedgerow on a hill ("In that immensity my thought is drowned," in John Heath-Stubbs's translation). Why then render "infinity" as "eternity," quite a different proposition? (Is there not too in the gerund *passando* ["in passing"] some gentle aftertremor of the Dantescan "*guarda e passa*" ("look and pass on!"), that brutal admonition of Virgil to Dante in the *Inferno*?) Nor is "wretchedness" quite right for *umiltà* which is more accurately rendered as "lowliness;" these are not merely the wretched, but the lowly, the meek, of the earth. Sartarelli gets it right in the conclusion where he uses "the lowly" to translate *umili*, but this is, alas, for the sake of a rather forced rhyme which distorts Saba's final meaning; the poet finds his thought grow not "more holy," but "purer," in the presence both of the meek as well as of what is "meanest" (*più turpe*). Again, the tiny unobtrusive repetition of a simple word (*più*) gives the line its sly spin: "*più puro dove più turpe è la via*" ("more pristine where more squalid is the way").

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Readers new to Saba may want to delay immersion in the *History and Chronicle of the Songbook* and stick with the poems; despite Saba's infectious sense of humor and the general excellence of Sartarelli's rendition of his prose, he often comes across as almost buffoonishly self-mesmerized. The *History and Chronicle* thus begins with the announcement that "ignoring Saba's poetry would be like ignoring the evidence of a natural phenomenon" and then, within the space of a few lines, we are told that "Saba" was born in the same year as Pinocchio! In this unique document, the genial and the hyperbolic jostle and elbow each other on every page. At worst, prolonged exposure to Saba's self-infatuation is like being cornered by a monomaniac brimming with photo albums of the family vacation; the eyes glaze over but the gloating commentary drones on. At its best, however, the *History* does illumine many of Saba's poems, and for this alone it is precious.

Despite the faults of the translation, many of the shorter poems do succeed. To give a final example, Sartarelli captures the tenderness capped by sarcasm of the late poem "Woman," a lyric that owes much to Heine:

> When just a girl
> you used to sting
> like a bramble bush. Even your foot
> was a weapon, my wild one.
>
> You were hard to catch.
> Still
> young you are, still
> beautiful. The scars
> of time and sorrow bind our souls,
> of two make one. And behind
> the coal-black hair I wrap around
> my fingers, I no longer fear
> the small white pointed devil's ear.

There are other successes in both volumes. Sartarelli set himself a hugely ambitious challenge, and if he has not always fully met it, he has the honor of the attempt. Much of his achievement is inevitably tacit. The final (1954) version of the *Canzoniere* comprises more than six-hundred pages, to which the apocryphal and deleted poems add another three-hundred or so pages; to select poems at once representative of the whole and also conducive to translation must have been a Herculean labor. Sartarelli's introductions, notes, and bibliography for both volumes are admirable for their perspicacity and shrewd assessments; he is especially good at tracing Saba's career through its sometimes tortuous permutations and often displays a kind of empathy with his poet that reminds one of the master himself. This is the best introduction to the work of an unusual and utterly original poet. Perhaps in some heavenly dimension Saba is even now nodding his head and clucking softly in sublime self-satisfaction as he chortles: "Of course, Saba is untranslatable! Saba is a force of nature. He is as impervious to translation as a strutting white chicken or a lonely and vocal goat or the gray sea-waves of Trieste."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Gérard de Nerval's "Chimeras"

translated & with an introduction by Daniel Mark Epstein

Born Gérard Labrunie in Paris in 1808, Nerval was, under his assumed name, Baudelaire's model of the "poète maudit," the doomed poet with a vision so intense the world will destroy him if he does not destroy himself. His masterpiece, "Les Chimères" (named for the mythic she-monster with lion's head, goat's body, and serpent's tail), is one of the greatest sonnet sequences ever written.

Like Poe, another of Baudelaire's heroes, Nerval suffered from manic depression and delusions of grandeur. After a manic episode in 1841, he was judged insane and hospitalized for nine months. During this period he wrote "Christ on the Mount of Olives," and a version of "Delphica." During that initial stay in the Clinique du Montmartre, Labrunie became Nerval. The *nom de plume* is based upon a genealogy the poet invented to replace his real family tree. Like those who discover past lives through hypnosis, Gérard fancied that he was descended from the Roman emperor Nerva, via relatives of Napoleon. So, the voice of "The Chimeras" is not merely that of the mortal Labrunie, it is also the voice of a much-reincarnated prophet who speaks with the wisdom of the ages.

The emotion that inspired the "Chimeras" is like the theme of Dante's *La Vita Nuova*: the yearning for a woman, the anguish of love lost, the desire to atone with the object of desire; these are the first steps in the soul's journey toward divine love and illumination. But to Nerval, Christ is merely one of the immortal prophets, along with Apollo, Orpheus, Pythagoras, and Nerval, who are leading humankind toward enlightenment.

The sequence is in three parts, beginning with six poems for the lost beloved, who shifts her shape to appear now as a lost bride, now as a queen, then as sorceress, muse, and priestess. In "Artemis," she becomes death, who has loved the poet "from cradle to tomb." (Nerval's mother died when he was two.) Entwined with the yearning for the unattainable women is the mourning for a spiritual energy that was long ago generated by the ancient goddesses.

The second movement is the narrative "Christ on the Mount of Olives." In despair over his betrayal by God and man, Christ actually describes his pain at the crucifixion and his chilling view of the godless void *before* Pilate arrests him; his fate is the more horrible because he sees it coming. Nerval's identification with the tormented savior is poignant. The third part, the serpent's tail of the "Chimeras," is the lovely hymn to animism, "The Golden Verses"—Nerval's joyful answer to the atheistic horror of the "Mount of Olives." Christ on the cross proclaimed that everything was dead. The poet at the end of his spiritual journey sees that everything is alive.

Nerval finished his "Chimeras" in 1853. He was found hanging, dead by his own hand, in the rue de la Vieille-Lanterne at dawn on January 26, 1855.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

El desdichado

Je suis le ténébreux,—le veuf,—l'inconsolé,
Le prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie:
Ma seule *etoile* est morte,—et mon luth constellé
Porte le *Soleil noir* de la *Mélancolie*.

Dans la nuit du tombeau, toi qui m'as consolé,
Rends-moi le Pausilippe et la mer d'Italie,
La *fleur* qui plaisait tant à mon coeur désolé,
Et la treille où le pampre à la rose s'allie.

Suis-je Amour ou Phoebus? . . . Lusignan ou Biron?
Mon front est rouge encor du baiser de la reine;
J'ai rêvé dans la grotte où nage la syrène . . .

Et j'ai deux fois vainquer traversé l'Achéron:
Modulant tour à tour sur la lyre d'Orphée
Les soupirs de la sainte et les cris de la fée.

Myrtho

Je pense à toi, Myrtho, divine enchanteresse,
Au Pausilippe altier, de mille feux brillant,
A ton front inondé des clartés d'Orient.
Aux raisins noirs mêlés avec l'or de ta tresse.

C'est dans ta coupe aussi que j'avais bu l'ivresse,
Et dans l'éclair furtif de ton oeil souriant,
Quand aux pieds d'Iacchus on me voyait priant,
Car la Muse m'a fait l'un de fils de la Grèce.

Je sais pourquoi là-bas le volcan s'est rouvert . . .
C'est qu'hier tu l'avais touché d'un pied agile,
Et de cendres soudain l'horizon s'est couvert.

Depuis qu'un duc normand brisa tes dieux d'argile,
Toujours, sous les rameaux du laurier de Virgile,
Le pâle Hortensia s'unit au Myrte vert!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The disinherited

I move in darkness—widowed—beyond solace,
The Prince of Aquitaine in a ruined tower.
My one star is dead; the black sun of sadness
Eclipses the constellation of my guitar.

O you who brought me light in the night of the tomb,
Bring back Posillipo and the Italian sea;
Bring back the flower that made my sad heart glad,
The grove where the rose and vine twined joyously.

Am I Eros or Apollo, Lusignan or Biron?
My brow still burns red from my Queen's kisses.
I dreamed such dreams in the cave of a swimming siren,

And I've crossed Acheron in glory, twice
To play on the lyre of Orpheus and intone
The sighs of the saint and the fairy's clear cries.

Myrtho

Myrtho, I think of you, divine sorceress,
At proud Posillipo a thousand fires made bright;
I think of your brow bathed with morning light,
Black grapes wound in your golden tresses.

From your cup I drank the draft of drunkenness;
One peek at the lightning of your smiling eye—
Next I knew I was on my knees to Bachhus.
The Muse had made me one of the sons of Greece.

I know why the volcano boiled up again:
You touched it with your light footfall yesterday.
The horizon grew dark with ashes all of a sudden.

Once, a Norman duke shattered your gods of clay;
Still today, under the boughs of Virgil's laurel,
Pale hydrangea's wedded to your green myrtle.

THE DISINHERITED: *Posillipo* is a beautiful town near Naples associated with Virgil. Guy de *Lusignan* (1129–94) was King of Jerusalem and later Cyprus. The family was in legend said to be descended from the fairy Mélusine. Charles, duc de *Biron*, was a famous lover and adventurer.

MYRTHO: Nerval made up the name of his erotic sorceress.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Horus

Le dieu Kneph en tremblant ébranlait l'univers:
Isis, la mère, alors se leva sur sa couche,
Fit un geste de haine à son époux farouche,
Et l'ardeur d'autrefois brilla dans ses yeux verts.

"Le voyez-vous, dit-elle, il meurt, ce vieux pervers,
Tous les frimas du monde ont passé par sa bouche,
Attachez son pied tors, éteignez son oeil louche,
C'est le dieu des volcans et le roi des hivers!

"L'aigle a déjà passé, l'esprit nouveau m'appelle,
J'ai revêtu pour lui la robe de Cybèle . . .
C'est l'enfant bien-aimé d'Hermès et d'Osiris!"

La déesse avait fui sur sa conque dorée,
La mer nous renvoyait son image adorée,
Et les cieux rayonnaient sous l'écharpe d'Iris.

Anteros

Tu demandes pourquoi j'ai tant de rage au coeur
Et sur un col flexible une tête indomptée;
C'est que je suis issu de la race d'Antée,
Je retourne les dards contre le dieu vainqueur.

Oui, je suis de ceux-là qu'inspire le Vengeur,
Il m'a marqué le front de sa lèvre irritée,
Sous le pâleur d'Abel, hélas! ensanglantée,
J'ai parfois de Caín l'implacable rougeur!

Jéhovah! le dernier, vaincu par ton génie,
Qui, du fond des enfers, criait: "O tyrannie!"
C'est mon aïeul Bélus ou mon père Dagon . . .

Ils m'ont plongé trois fois dans les eaux du Cocyte,
Et protégeant tout seul ma mère Amalécyte,
Je ressème à ses pieds les dents du vieux dragon.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Horus

Kneph the god shuddered, shaking the cosmos;
Mother Isis sat upright in bed,
Pointed with spite to her barbarous spouse,
Her green eyes afire as of old, and said:

"See, the old lecher. He's almost dead
Through whose mouth every killing frost has blown.
Quick bind his feet, blind his crossed eyes,
This God of volcanoes, this Monarch of ice.

"Hail the love-child of Hermes and Osiris,
For Him I put on Cybele's livery.
The eagle has flown, a new spirit calls me . . ."

On a golden seashell the Goddess had gone
But the ocean returned her sweet image to us:
In the sash of Iris's rainbow, the skies shone.

Anteros

You ask me why I dare stick out my neck,
Bull-headed, why my heart's so full of rage?
It's because I come from Antaeus's lineage—
God hurls his darts at me, I throw them back.

I am inspired by the Vengeful God
Who planted his angry kiss upon my brow.
Sometimes I'm pale as Abel, then the blood
Of Cain burns to the surface, even now,

O Jehovah! What did your genius avail
Against Dagon my father, or grandsire Baal
Who cursed you "tyrants" from the pit of Hell?

They steeped me thrice in Cocytus from Hades's shore,
And I guard my mother, the pagan Amalekite.
At her feet I sow the dragon's teeth once more.

HORUS: *Horus*, the falcon-headed Egyptian god of light, represents the dawn of a new age. *Kneph* is the Egyptian god who made the earth. The *eagle* is Zeus's sign and a conventional symbol of empires.
ANTEROS: *Anteros*, brother of Eros, is the avenger of unrequited love. *Baal* is a generic name for any of the agrarian gods of the Canaanites and Moabites. *Dagon* is a Philistine idol dethroned by Jehovah. *Cocytus* is the "river of cries" in Hades. The *Amalekites* were descendants of Esau who fought the Jews until Saul defeated them.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Delfica

La connais-tu, Dafné, cette ancienne romance,
Au pied du sycomore, ou sous les lauriers blancs,
Sous l'olivier, le myrthe ou les saules tremblants,
Cette chanson d'amour . . . qui toujours recommence!

Reconnais-tu le Temple, au péristyle immense,
Et les citrons amers où s'imprimaient tes dents?
Et la grotte, fatale aux hôtes imprudents,
Où du dragon vaincu dort l'antique semence.

Ils reviendront ces dieux que tu pleures toujours!
Le temps va ramener l'ordre des anciens jours;
La terre a tressailli d'un soufle prophétique . . .

Cependant la sybille au visage latin
Est endormie encor sous l'arc de Constantin:
—Et rien n'a dérangé la sévère portique.

Artémis

La Treizième revient . . . C'est encor la première;
Et c'est toujours la Seule,—ou c'est le seul moment:
Car es-tu reine, ô Toi! la première ou dernière?
Es-tu roi, toi le Seul ou le dernier amant? . . .

Aimez qui vous aima du berceau dans la bière;
Celle que j'aimai seul m'aime encor tendrement:
C'est la mort—ou la morte . . . O délice! ô tourment!
La rose qu'elle tient, c'est la *Rose trémière*.

Sainte napolitaine aux mains pleines de feux,
Rose au coeur violet, fleur de sainte Gudule:
As-tu trouvé ta croix dans le désert des cieux?

Roses blanches, tombez! vous insultez nos Dieux,
Tombez, fantômes blancs, de votre ciel qui brûle:
—La sainte de l'abîme est plus sainte à mes yeux!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Delfica

Daphne beneath pale laurel or in the lee
Of the fig tree, hear, do you know the old refrain,
Daphne in shade of olive or myrtle tree,
Remember the love song, ever beginning again?

You know the Temple, the range of enormous columns,
The imprint of your teeth in bitter lemons,
The cave that devoured impetuous guests,
Where the old seed of the vanquished dragon rests.

They shall return, the Gods you have been mourning!
Time will bring back the rites of ancient days.
The earth trembles from a prophet's breathing;

Meanwhile the sibyl with her Roman face
Sleeps still beneath the Arch of Constantine,
And nothing has disturbed its rigid line.

Artemis

The Thirteenth comes 'round again. Still she's first
And always my Only, the moment unchanging.
O Queen of the lovely! Of all, first or last,
My last lover, dear one, are you also my King?

Love the one who adored you from cradle to tomb.
She still loves me tenderly, my only love:
Death, my joy, my heartache, my dear departed!
She tenders the branching hollyhock all abloom,

Pale rose with violet heart, St. Gudule's rose.
O Saint of Naples with your bouquet of flames,
In the desert of heaven did you find your cross?

O fall, fall from that burning sky, white blossoms,
Come down! You insult our Gods, pale phantoms.
Holier is the saint who has known the abyss.

DELFICA: Nerval made up the title to evoke the Delphic oracle of Apollo.

ARTEMIS: *The Thirteenth* is the pivotal hour, which returns after the previous twelve have passed. The *Hollyhock*, the *rose trémière*, bears many blossoms on a stalk, symbolizing the incarnations of the soul. *Saint Gudule* is a patron saint of Brussels, whose Church of Saint Gudule had a fine rose window. *Saint of Naples* is a conflation of several saints including Rosalie of Naples and St. Lucie of Syracuse.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Le Christ aux Oliviers

Dieu est mort! le ciel est vide . . .
Pleurez! enfants, vous n'avez plus de père
—Jean-Paul

I

Quand le Seigneur, levant au ciel ses maigres bras,
Sous les arbres sacrés, comme font les poètes,
Se fut longtemps perdu dans ses douleurs muettes,
Et se jugea trahi par des amis ingrats;

Il se tourna vers ceux-qui l'attendaient en bas
Rêvant d'être des rois, des sages, des prophètes . . .
Mais engourdis, perdus dans le sommeil des bêtes,
Et se prit à crier: "Non, Dieu n'existe pas!"

Ils dormaient. "Mes amis, savez-vous *la nouvelle*?
J'ai touché de mon front à la voûte éternelle;
Je suis sanglant, brisé, souffrant pour bien des jours!

"Frères, je vous trompais: Abîme! abîme! abîme!
Le dieu manque à l'autel où je suis victime . . .
Dieu n'est pas! Dieu n'est plus!" Mais ils dormaient toujours!

II

Il reprit: "Tout est mort! J'ai parcouru les mondes;
Et j'ai perdu mon vol dans leurs chemins lactés,
Aussi loin que la vie, en ses veines fécondes,
Répand des sables d'or et des flots argentés:

"Partout le sol désert côtoyé par des ondes,
Des tourbillons confus d'océans agités . . .
Un souffle vague émeut les sphères vagabondes,
Mais nul esprit n'existe en ces immensités.

"En cherchant l'oeil de Dieu, je n'ai vu qu'une orbite
Vaste, noire et sans fond, d'où la nuit qui l'habite
Rayonne sur le monde et s'épaissit toujours;

"Un arc-en-ciel étrange entoure ce puits sombre,
Seuil de l'ancien chaos dont le néant est l'ombre,
Spirale engloutissant les Mondes et les Jours!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Christ on the Mount of Olives

God is dead! The sky empty . . .
Weep, children, you have no more father!
—Jean-Paul Richter

I

Our Lord lifted his arms skyward, like a poet
In a sacred wood. For a long, long time
He had been lost in sorrow too deep for rhyme,
Thinking ungrateful friends had sold him out.

He looked down. Awaiting him there was the crowd,
Folks dreaming of becoming wits, prophets, and kings—
Stupid people, lost in their bestial slumberings,
And he cried: "Now listen to me! There is no God!"

Nobody stirred. "Friends," he called, "have you
Heard the *news*? I cracked my head on the blue
Vault everlasting; for days now I've been hurt, bleeding!

"Brothers, I steered you wrong! Here's the abyss!
God left me alone at the altar, a vain sacrifice.
God is no more!" But nothing could wake them, nothing . . .

II

He began again: "Everything is dead! I've passed
Through all the worlds (got lost in the Milky Way)
As far as life's richest veins ever spread
Sands of gold and waves of silver, especially

Where tides lapped the deserts, and in the chaos
Of sea maelstroms . . . a vague breath in places
Moves the stray spheres, but no spirit
Exists in any of these enormous spaces.

Looking for God's eye I found only a socket—
Huge, pitch dark, and bottomless. Such night
Seethes there it seeps into this world, deepening always;

And around this pit arches a strange rainbow,
The sill of Old Chaos. The void is a mere shadow
Of that vortex devouring our worlds and days!"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

III

"Immobile Destin, muette sentinelle.
Froide Nécessité! . . . Hasard qui t'avançant
Parmi les mondes morts sous la neige éternelle,
Refroidis, par degrés, l'univers pâlissant,

"Sais-tu ce que tu fais, puissance originelle,
De tes soleils éteints, l'un l'autre se froissant . . .
Es-tu sûr de transmettre une haleine immortelle,
Entre un monde qui meurt et l'autre renaissant? . . .

"O mon pére! est-ce toi que je sens en moi-même?
As-tu pouvoir de vivre et de vaincre la mort?
Aurais-tu succombé sous un dernier effort

"De cet ange des nuits que frappa l'anathème? . . .
Car je me sens tout seul â pleurer et souffrir,
Hélas! et, si je meurs, c'est que tout va mourir!"

IV

Nul n'entendait gémir l'éternelle victime,
Livrant au monde en vain tout son coeur épanché;
Mais prêt à défaillir et sans force penché,
Il appela le *seul*—éveillé dans Solyme:

"Judas! lui cria-t-il, tu sais ce qu'on m'estime,
Hâte-toi de me vendre, et finis ce marché:
Je suis souffrant, ami! sur la terre couché . . .
Viens! ô toi qui, du moins, as la force du crime!"

Mais Judas s'en allait, mécontent et pensif,
Se trouvant mal payé, plein d'un remords si vif
Qu'il lisait ses noirceurs sur tous les murs écrites . . .

Enfin Pilate seul, qui veillait pour César,
Sentant quelque pitié, se tourna par hasard:
"Allez chercher ce fou!" dit-il aux satellites.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

III

"Mute sentinel, unmoving Destiny,
Cold Necessity! Chance, traversing
Dead worlds beneath eternal snows, making
The whitening universe colder degree by degree,

Unmoving mover, do you know what you're doing
With your burnt-out suns colliding randomly . . .
Will you pass the breath of immortality
To a world being reborn from another dying?

O my father! Is it you that I feel in me?
Can you live, conquer death, do you have the power
Or have you given in at the final hour

To that angel of night so direly
Accursed? I feel so alone in my suffering.
Alas! If I die, it's the end of everything."

IV

No one heard him groaning, the timeless victim
As he poured out his heart to the world in vain.
On the verge of fainting he murmured down
To the only soul awake in Jerusalem:

"Judas! You know what they think of me
Down there? Sell me out! Close the deal right now!
I'm hurting, my friend, far-gone, laid low.
Come, you at least have a criminal's energy!"

But Judas passed on, pissed off, lost in thought,
Bitter he's been paid so little to see
His name scribbled on walls, an obscenity . . .

At last it was Pilate, Caesar's lookout
Whom pity prodded to turn a partisan,
Saying, on impulse: "Bring me the madman."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

V

C'était bien lui, ce fou, cet insensé sublime . . .
Cet Icare oublié qui remontait les cieux,
Ce Phaéton perdu sous la foudre des dieux,
Ce bel Atys meurtri que Cybèle ranime!

L'augure interrogeait le flanc de la victime,
La terre s'enivrait de ce sang précieux . . .
L'univers étourdi penchait sur ses essieux,
Et l'Olympe un instant chancela vers l'abîme.

"Réponds! criait César à Jupiter Ammon,
Quel est ce nouveau dieu qu'on impose à la terre?
Et si ce n'est un dieu, c'est au moins un démon . . ."

Mais l'oracle invoqué pour jamais dut se taire;
Un seul pouvait au monde expliquer ce mystère:
—Celui qui donna l'âme aux enfants du limon.

Vers dorés

Eh quoi! tout est sensible!
—Pythagore

Homme! libre penseur—te crois-tu seul pensant
Dans ce monde où la vie éclate en toute chose:
Des forces que tu tiens ta liberté dispose,
Mais de tous tes conseils l'univers est absent.

Respecte dans la bête un esprit agissant . . .
Chaque fleur est une âme à la Nature éclose;
Un mystère d'amour dans le métal repose:
"Tout est sensible!"—Et tout sur ton être est puissant!

Crains dans le mur aveugle un regard qui t'épie:
A la matière même un verbe est attaché . . .
Ne la fais pas servir à quelque usage impie!

Souvent dans l'être obscur habite un Dieu caché;
Et comme un oeil naissant couvert par ses paupières,
Un pur esprit s'accroît sous l'écorce des pierres.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

V

This was he, the sublime fool indeed, the madman,
Sweet, torn Atys, whom Cybele gave new life,
This Phaeton in his prime God's thunder cut off,
This sky-climbing Icarus, all but forgotten.

The augur pored over the guts of the sacrifice,
Earth got drunk on his blood and flesh.
Tipsy the universe reeled on its axis,
Olympus lurched toward the abyss.

"Tell me," cried Caesar to Jupiter Ammon,
Via his oracle. "Who's this new God today
Lording it over us, a god or a demon?"

No mortal or oracle ever would say.
But the one who gave souls to the children of clay
Holds the key to the mystery—He alone.

The golden verses

So! Everything is sentient!
—Pythagoras

Man, freethinker! Do you believe that you alone
Can think, in this world where life's splendor
Bursts forth in everything? Your freedom has its power
—But you leave the universe out of the conversation.

Let us honor the beast for his irrepressible spirit;
Each flower is a soul that Nature discloses;
Even in metal one of love's mysteries reposes.
"All is conscious!" And we're under the spell of it.

Now beware using the Word to please the devil,
For matter cleaves to every utterance.
Beware the eye watching you in the blind rock wall,

For a god often is hidden among the "dark ones."
Like the eye born under the eyelid's veil,
A pure spirit quickens beneath the skin of stones.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Theater

The know nothings

by Mark Steyn

The day after the alleged U.S. election, I caught a French journalist on television recalling that he and his colleagues had mocked the way the final result in the recent presidential race in the Ivory Coast had taken twenty-four hours to come through, but that, with hindsight, they were a model of efficiency.

I doubt whether any of the blowhards infesting CNN and the other cable channels could have drawn such a contrast. The Ivory Coast election did not receive a lot of attention in the United States, and not just when measured against the attention the U.S. election received in the Ivory Coast. In all other G7 countries, it is perfectly normal to switch on the evening news and see stories from around the globe, often from quite unimportant places—the recent coup in Fiji, say—whereas, by comparison, ABC's "world news headquarters" in New York is a world headquarters with no branch offices. It can be argued that as citizens of the preeminent economic, military, and cultural force on the planet Americans have no pressing need to follow affairs in Fiji, the Ivory Coast, or even France or Britain. But the accelerating insularity of the United States is like a virus, multiplying wildly and destroying what should be the support systems of a healthy culture. You see it most clearly in the popular arts. Before "multiculturalism" was invented, Americans were genuinely multicultural: they devoured *Heidi* and *The Three Musketeers* and *Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves*, all of which would have difficulty securing an American publisher today. The horizons shrivel a little more with each banal retreat—which is to say that my biggest gripe with the new incarnation of *The Full Monty* is this: they've moved it from Sheffield, Yorkshire, to Buffalo, New York.

In other words, the story is still that of six unemployed steelworkers who become male strippers but now they're no longer beery blokes from the Pennines but blue-collar guys from upstate. The film is the highest-grossing British movie of all time—nearly $300 million worldwide—though, given that all that gross goes to 20th Century Fox, it's not really "British" at all. Still, ever since the picture came out, friends and acquaintances have called up from time to time and said they've been asked to write the book or lyrics or music for the Broadway version, and what did I think of the studio's idea to move it to, say, Pittsburgh? I said I thought it was a terrible idea, that part of the charm of the film was the essentially British naffness of the locale and characters. "You may be right," mused Don Black, the lyricist of *Sunset Boulevard*, who'd been mulling over the property. "If there's one thing we British do well, it's naff." "Naff" is a British word that doesn't precisely translate into American—it means, I suppose, a particularly exquisite kind of awfulness—and the fact that the word doesn't really translate is a good indicator of why the story doesn't.

So why do it? According to Lawrence

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Law, the former president of 20th Century Fox's Searchlight division (which released the film) and now co-producer of the musical, "The team were going to be much more comfortable doing it with an American story rather than wondering all the time what those guys in Sheffield would have said." That's true, in the sense that Rodgers and Hammerstein might have been more "comfortable" moving *The King and I* from Thailand to Cleveland; Lerner and Loewe would have been more "comfortable" making *My Fair Lady* about a speech therapist in the Bronx, or *Brigadoon* about a strip mall in Jersey that magically reappears once every hundred years. I think Mr. Law is concerned mainly about the comfort levels of his audience, though that concern may be misplaced and merely another reflection of Broadway parochialism: the most successful theatrical enterprises of the last two decades have been set in revolutionary France, a sewer underneath the Paris Opera House, and a feline junkyard in London. If Andrew Lloyd Webber's career is any guide, the best way to limit your receipts is to make your musical American; the guy was a billion-dollar money machine until he made the mistake of setting his shows in Hollywood (*Sunset Boulevard*) and Louisiana (*Whistle Down the Wind*). But American showbusiness is wary about anything foreign: I see that the U.S. commercials for *Billy Elliot*, the current sleeper hit from Britain, don't use a word of dialogue from the film lest television viewers are put off by those weird English accents. Instead, the ads feature satisfied American moviegoers offering generalized praise such as "It's a great movie about following your dreams."

Mr. Law's defence is the usual one: *The Full Monty* may have been "about" six blokes from Yorkshire but it's really universal. "Although the film was set in Sheffield," he says, "it was obvious it translated everywhere. It is the same heart and for that reason it could travel." Universality is the holy grail of Broadway theatricals. Joe Stein, librettist of *Fiddler on the Roof*, once told me he was standing in the wings during the Tokyo production when one of the locals remarked to him that he was surprised they understood the show in America because it was so Japanese. But the key to being universal is being particular. I've quoted before the definitive pronouncement on the subject, from Goethe: "A poet should address the specific, and if there be anything about him he will articulate the universal."

If you start with the universal and then try to apply it to something specific, it's far trickier. Having decided to relocate to the rust belt, *The Full Monty*'s team justify it only by shoehorning in lame lines like "We gave the world Buffalo wings. Now we're going to give them Buffalo wieners." Granted, the show starts with the same building blocks as the film: six ordinary fellows, out of work, out of money, and out of shape, note the way their women pack the local club to see some faggy prancers from the professional circuit, and decide that, with nothing left to lose, they might as well give it a go. Better yet, unlike the ninnies in the spangly G-strings, they'll go all the way —or, as they say in England, the full monty. Here perhaps Mr. Law's reconstruction takes on a truly bizarre character. When Rodgers and Hammerstein moved Molnár's *Liliom* to rural Maine, they at least had the savvy to figure out that *Liliom* didn't sound very downeast and to change the title to *Carousel*. Mr. Law, having a ready-made hit title, is determined to hang onto it even though, in this adaptation, it no longer has any meaning. British slang is partial to the appropriation of proper names—the full monty, stop dorissing about, what a nancy, what a wally—and, in this instance, the title is part of the show's identity. At the time he was writing the film, Simon Beaufoy was an amiable loser, not unlike the chaps in his story; in the year or so before the movie's release he gave a series of cheap'n'cheerful talks on BBC radio wryly describing his experience with the execs at Fox. They had not, for example, been keen on the title. Nobody would know what it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

meant. The studios have a preference for the kind of titles where it doesn't matter what they mean as long as they sound like the titles of films you've already seen—*Simply Irresistible*, *A Simple Plan*, *Since You've Been Gone*, *Beyond Silence*, *Fatal Attraction*, *Basic Instinct*, *Indifferent Reaction* . . . Richard Curtis, screenwriter of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, the most successful British film of all time until *The Full Monty* came along, had the same difficulty. He recalls getting a fax from Hollywood saying their focus groups showed men didn't like films with "wedding" in the title and *no-one* liked films with "funeral" in the title. The suggested substitutions were *Taking the Plunge*, *The Course of True Love*, *The Wedding Season*, *Inviting Companions* . . . Both Curtis's and Beaufoy's titles are a literal illustration of Goethe's dictum; both are very specific and both became universal—memorable phrases planted in the language. Indeed, watching the new *Full Monty* at the Eugene O'Neill, you suddenly realize that the only reason any of these steelworkers in Buffalo would know the phrase is if they'd seen the original film. The title of *The Full Monty* is one reason why it's a valuable property worth turning into a musical. Slapped above the marquee when it's unconnected to anything that follows, it's as cheesy and unconvincing as Bogie's Big Apple Diner would be in Sheffield.

There is a healthy trajectory for most stories: from book to play to film. The plethora of movie adaptations—*Footloose*, *Saturday Night Fever*—that stagger onto Broadway each season is not just a reflection of the barrenness of the stage, but, in a very real way, an offence against the natural order. Producers like film adaptations because they come with pre-sold hit titles, but on stage they look like some ghastly karaoke reductio of the original. At first sight, the overhaul of *The Full Monty* sets it apart from the tacky opportunism of the other celluloid retreads. But, as the play proceeds, you realize the changes spring not from some radical reexamination of the material but merely from a desire to fit the property to the demands of American storytelling, especially musical comedy storytelling. The new *Full Monty* is written by Terrence McNally (book) and David Yazbek (music and lyrics). McNally is the busiest playwright in New York these days, last seen in town with his musical *Ragtime* and his *cause célèbre Corpus Christi*, the one about the gay Jesus sodomizing Judas Iscariot. Whatever the merits of his straight plays (if you'll forgive the oxymoron), I don't think he's ever written a good musical; his books are never more than functional connective tissue between the songs, failing both ends of Goethe's equation—they're not very particular and they never succeed in enlarging the story to musical size. But, notwithstanding his dismal record, he seems to get all the work. It's probably correct to say he wouldn't be "comfortable" with Sheffield, but Buffalo seems to be equally foreign to him as well: certainly, there's no real sense of place.

So the question is: what aspects of *The Full Monty is* McNally comfortable with? In the original, the women are the confident characters, and the lads, booted out of the steel mills and lacking even a couple of quid for a pint or two down at the pub, feel their maleness has been somehow diminished. What's interesting in the adaptation is what catches McNally's eye. Those who feel the theme of homosexuality is insufficiently addressed on the American stage will be heartened to hear that he plays up the gayness. In the film, two members of the troupe, not hitherto gay (or, more precisely, not hitherto aware of it), belatedly discover they're in love—a moment which is played in a wonderfully matter-of-fact way that represents one of the best British qualities: a genuinely relaxed indifference a world away from the posturing "tolerance" of American identity politics. Needless to say, that's not enough for McNally. Gaying up the plot, he has his principal, Jerry, confront a male stripper, highly uncloseted. To our hero's surprise, the faggot slugs him with a sharp left, sending Jerry crashing to the floor, a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

punch that prompts him to re-examine his sense of male identity. Thus, when we reach the point where two of his dancers become gay lovers, Jerry is ready to stand up and defend them. Unlike the film, the show is oddly overwrought, preferring to trumpet feeling rather than reveal it.

Using the gayness to point up Jerry's goodness is only the most obvious example of the tonal changes McNally has ushered in. Along the way, obviously, certain things get left out: the "dole queue" scene has gone. This is the moment when the boys are lining up at the dole office for their welfare checks, the in-house radio starts playing Donna Summer, and they lapse involuntarily into their routine. This scene is beloved in Britain. Visiting some job center or other, the Prince of Wales was even prevailed upon to join in and recreate the dance. It may well be that there is no precise equivalent in Buffalo to a British dole queue, but it's not the setting that doesn't travel so much as the impulses underlying the scene; the film derived much of its comedy from the sight of unshapely men cavorting to slick disco anthems in ugly settings. When you replace the accompaniment with music that expresses character, with lyrics that the participants actually sing, with proper choreography that they have been taught how to dance, much of the film's low-key affecting sweetness disappears. "The charm of amateurishness is a very British concept," Alan Jay Lerner, a great Anglophile, once said to me, discussing the difference between *42nd Street* and *Salad Days*, an ingenuous English smash but one which would close at intermission over here.

And so the charm of amateurishness has been bulldozed aside for the forced optimism of musical comedy, and the forlorn paradoxes of the characters' lives goes missing: Fat Dave, whose sense of inadequacy blinds him to the happiness of his marriage; Harold, the former foreman, whose loss of boss status is so crushing that he cannot tell his wife as she breezily runs up the credit card and instead gets dressed in his suit and tie, picks up his briefcase, and leaves the house every morning pretending to go to work. Beginning with the opener, "Scrap," David Yazbek's songs, written in a kind of theatricalized pop-rock and not being entirely satisfactory as either, underline emotions of which the original characters were barely aware. It might have been better to have tried the approach of *Cabaret* or *Follies*: dispense with "book" songs and just have numbers from the guys' act that obliquely comment on the action. But there's no sign Yazbek would have been up to that: the exhibitionist rhymes are a riot of celebrity namedrops, famous brands, and other pop-culture references that, along with the penis jokes of the book, distance you from any real involvement. McNally's principal invention is a rehearsal pianist for the lads, a brassy hard-bitten seen-it-all old trouper played by Kathleen Freeman in a performance that's ruthlessly honed but only underlines how showbusiness is now the only story Broadway knows how to tell. The new *Monty* is now another heartening fable of "making it." But Sheffield is not Buffalo: you can't make it, there's nowhere to go because everywhere's crummy; the great American nomadic religion of moving on, getting out has no application—Sheffield is not a starting point, a place to escape from. The original *Monty*'s blokes know they'll always be losers: their story is about mitigating life's vicissitudes. In the new *Monty*, they think they're Liza Minnelli.

Oh, well. Audiences seem happy, at least by the time we get to the all-singing, all-dancing, all-revealing finale when the guys' wives run through the orchestra to rouse us to a frenzy of cheers for their men. Jack O'Brien directs with his usual vulgarity and seems likely to be rewarded for it. *Monty*, unlike *Ragtime*, is a competent good time, and it has the whiff of this year's faux hit —the one we all agree to pretend is a smash and which, with luck, will break even before being quietly forgotten. As the old broad of an accompanist tells the guys, "If you want to be in showbusiness, you should be

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

spayed first." The original *Monty* wasn't about showbusiness. This one is, and so it's been spayed. Simon Beaufoy, the original writer, had no say in the matter. 20th Century Fox owned the rights, and they didn't bother inviting him to opening night.

As *The Full Monty* sails from Sheffield to Buffalo, Neil Simon is traveling in the opposite direction. Evidently, the accusation that he just peddles the same old formula and constricted characters every season has got to him, so he's decided to broaden his horizons. *The Dinner Party* (at the Music Box) is set not in New York or Los Angeles but Paris. And not Americans in Paris, but Parisians, all of them: André, Claude, Albert, Mariette, Yvonne, Gabrielle. Three men gather in the private dining room of a Paris restaurant for what seems initially an Agatha Christie set-up: why have they been invited? what's the connection? As the women arrive, it transpires that everyone there was once married to one of his or her fellow dinner guests, which as mystery resolutions go isn't exactly *Murder on the Orient Express*. But, with that out of the way, the divorcés settle down to thrashing out outstanding grievances from their failed marriage. "Do you know what I never said to you during our divorce?" "That you'll take less money?"

The admirable Veanne Cox does her well-loved neurotic disintegration routine with customary aplomb, though it would be nice to see her talents stretched just a little. Henry Winkler from "Happy Days" (the sitcom, not Beckett) makes his Broadway debut and seems chiefly preoccupied with making sure the audience likes him. But the shtick quickly sours and people start saying things like "Your womb became a receptacle for my self-loathing" and "We were two termites eating away at each other's innards." It's Simon who seems to be eating away at his innards here.

There is, you'll have gathered, nothing remotely French about these people except their monikers. A sextet of Parisian divorcés, finding themselves round the same dinner table, would have a grand old time and enjoy the food, rather than lapsing gloomily into an interminable edition of *Oprah* with no redeeming uplift. In 1994, John Irving published *A Son of the Circus*, a novel set in India whose four-year gestation was apparently insufficient to permit any extensive research or even casual vacationing into the subcontinent and which begins with this disclaimer: "This isn't a novel about India. I don't know India. I was only there once." A novel set in India that isn't about India or any other recognizable reality. A play set in Paris that isn't Parisian. A musical set in Buffalo that isn't Buffalonian. The enduring injuction of creative-writing courses—write what you know—is fine in theory, but you can't help noticing that these days our writers don't seem to know very much.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art

Lee Krasner in Brooklyn

by Karen Wilkin

It would have been nice to say that the Lee Krasner retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum[1] totally changed my mind about the work of this problematic painter, to say that the show makes a convincing case for Krasner as an important artist in her own right and that it makes you think of her primarily as an independent force in the heady days of postwar American painting and only secondarily as the long-suffering wife of Jackson Pollock. (It's worth noting that Krasner's marriage to Pollock, while unquestionably of crucial importance to his own short life and his evolution as an artist, occupied only about fifteen years of Krasner's nearly half-century-long painting career.) *Pace* my revisionist and feminist colleagues, the Brooklyn exhibition simply reinforced the impression I had formed from the flurry of Krasner shows held in the 1970s and early 1980s at various New York galleries, the Whitney, and the Corcoran, culminating in the retrospective, organized by Barbara Rose at the very end of Krasner's life, which came to MOMA in 1985. Krasner seemed to me to be an intelligent, ambitious, but limited artist, someone whose work as a whole never quite fulfilled the promise of her best individual pictures. I had classified her as a good, pretty solid, but not first-rank painter, and I can't say that I came away from the Brooklyn show—the first full-scale retrospective to be organized since Krasner's death in 1985—with a revised opinion.

The Brooklyn show introduces you first to Krasner's work from 1930 to about 1945, the formative efforts of an energetic young painter in her twenties and early thirties—she was born in 1908—who was clearly knowledgeable about many of the most current, most radical notions of what a painting could be. You meet Krasner first in a refreshingly direct, straightforward self-portrait from 1930, liberally informed by Cézanne and Derain: a full-lipped twenty-two year old with a steady gaze and a fist full of brushes, no beauty, but full of character and determination. This fresh but not very remarkable painting elicits one of the most preposterous wall texts I've ever encountered—not a light assertion, given the standards of the genre. The panel, the work of the show's curator, Robert Hobbs—the author of a monograph on Krasner as well as of the exhibition catalogue—notes that Krasner painted the picture outdoors, having nailed a mirror to a tree, and that "by painting not herself but her mirrored reflection, Krasner explores the idea of representation as an approximation of reality." Does this mean that no other self-portraits in the history of art were painted with the aid of mirrors? Staggering news, indeed. Once

1 "Lee Krasner" opened at the Brooklyn Museum of Art on October 6, 2000 and remains on view until January 7, 2001. A catalogue, by Robert Hobbs, has been published by Independant Curators International and is distributed by Harry N. Abrams (224 pages, $49.50).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you recover from the shock of this revelation, you discover that this combination of wrong-headedness, modish thinking, and pretension is typical not only of the rest of Hobbs's wall-texts—he tells you, for example, that Hans Hofmann codified the rules of modern art—but also of the accompanying jargon-riddled catalogue whose thesis, briefly, is that Krasner was a postmodernist *avant la lettre*, a painter whose work is inextricably bound up with language, disjunctions, refusal of a signature style, and all the rest of it.

Perhaps because of her amazingly original conviction that representation was only an approximation of reality, noted by Hobbs, the broad postimpressionist naturalism of Krasner's early self-portrait soon yielded to more adventurous, sometimes contradictory, approaches. A sleek little street scene from 1935, *Gansevoort II* (Pollock-Krasner Foundation), suggests that Krasner looked hard, at least for a while, at the work of Stuart Davis and the Surrealists. Davis, the pragmatic but inventive all-American Cubist, had authority for Krasner's generation for many reasons—his uncompromising commitment to modernism, his sojourn in France in the late 1920s, his progressive politics, and his social activism—while the Surrealists' ideas about the unconscious as the source of creativity had become articles of faith among forward-looking New York artists. *Gansevoort II* rather engagingly mixes waterfront imagery, floating signs, numbers, ambiguous abstract forms, and threatening perspectives—Yankee modernism meets early Miró bathed in moody de Chirico lighting. (The wall text here omits any connection with Miró or Davis, both painters whose work any alert young artist would have had ample opportunity to see in New York at the time, and opts instead for the exclusive influence of "American magic realism" and de Chirico.)

A stint at Hans Hofmann's school in the late 1930s furnished Krasner with a notion of what a picture could be and a formal vocabulary that lasted her for the rest of her life: a conception of a painting as a surface upon and against which discrete, planar, essentially non-specific pictorial events of varying degrees of complexity take place. Hofmann's effect on the young painter is visible in her angular charcoal drawings from the nude, almost certainly done at the school itself, demonstrations of her mastery of the schematic mapping of the body's thrusts through space that was fundamental to Hofmann's teaching. The benefits of his influence are even more evident in a couple of loose-jointed oil on paper studies that turn what must have been pretty conventional still life set-ups into exuberant explosions of planes.

Yet Krasner seems to have backed away, at first, from the implications of these early works, preferring to flatten their pulsing surfaces and rein in their expansiveness with clear geometry—not surprisingly, in retrospect, since she had recently become a member of American Abstract Artists, a group so devoted to the geometric purity of what was then referred to as "non-objective" painting that Mondrian joined them on his arrival in the United States. Krasner, however, never succumbed entirely to the "official" philosophy of AAA (nor, in fact, did many of the group's other members). By 1940, she became wholly involved with exploring the possibilities of Picasso's synthetic Cubism, evidenced in Brooklyn by a series of muscular, thickly crusted, tight still lifes, pictures at once energetic, accomplished, and reminiscent of Arshile Gorky's similarly inspired (and slightly earlier) efforts along the same lines.

The exhibition's tracking of Krasner's early formation reveals her as a more or less generic member of her generation—although as a native New Yorker and a Hofmann student, she was perhaps more sophisticated than most and, according to the evidence of her early work, clearly gifted. Later, she certainly developed a reputation for being tough-minded and fierce. ("Brutal" was the adjective one old acquaintance used.) Unfortunately, little in the rest of the show seems to bear out the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

promise of those early works. What remains constant is the shift between exuberance and discipline, between expansiveness and tightness, along with some of the spirit of restless inquiry that animated the pictures in the exhibition's introductory section. The catalogue ties all of it to the poetry of Rimbaud, Judaic ritual, the deaths of people close to her, and what Hobbs calls "her intransigence and relentless pursuit of an ever evasive self." The painter, Hobbs claims, was "unable to settle for long into the comforts of a distinctly individual style" because of her self-doubt, yet, he adds, "she pursued her uncertainties with dogged determination, finding not just chimeras but convincing personas that soon revealed themselves to be beautiful, yet static masks unable to keep pace with life's dynamisms."

Whether you buy this explanation or not, in the exhibition, the disciplined side of Krasner is evident in her Little Image series, the dense, all-over paintings of tightly packed, layered "glyphs" that preoccupied her in the late 1940s. They remind you not only of Adolph Gottlieb's *Pictographs*, but also of Bradley Walker Tomlin's crisp calligraphies, and, inevitably, of Jackson Pollock's thickly brushed "horror vacui," pre-pour images of the 1940s. What distinguishes Krasner's versions of the genre is their airlessness. The Little Image pictures, whether gestural or angular, cursive or geometric, always seem claustrophobic and rigid, as though they resulted from clenched, repetitive hand gestures that demand to be contrasted with the full-body, rhythmic swoops and pours of her husband's most exciting paintings of the same years. As a group, the Little Image paintings seem almost steamrollered, as flat as pages of text, obsessively overwritten into illegibility. There's no sense of space, no matter how shallow or unstable, no ambiguity.

Happily, in the early 1950s, Krasner found a way of making pictures that subverted this tendency toward hardening and tightening when she began to construct paintings with fragments of her own and Pollock's discarded works. (No, I am not going to expand on the obvious psychological implications of that kind of appropriation, destruction, and reanimation). What is equally obvious is that the method forced Krasner to build her images with relatively large units instead of endlessly subdividing them into glyphs—a "subtext" of smaller elements was already present in the existing imagery of her raw materials. In addition, the pre-existing images added an element of chance, a way of courting spontaneity and allowing intuition, rather than will, to dominate. Perhaps most important, the very nature of collage—pasting one element literally on top of another—gave Krasner a way of suggesting space. I'm oversimplifying, of course, but the result was to give her a method that, without resembling Pollock's pouring, allowed her some of the same freedom and unexpectedness.

Krasner's generous, scaled-up collage paintings of the first half of the 1950s, with their clean edges, their clear expanses of color, and their amplitude, with their sense of the natural world's having been transposed—but not replicated—as vigorous constructed images, are a refreshing change after the knotty Little Images. When Krasner began to translate the qualities of these collage paintings into painted images, shortly after Pollock's death in 1956, she managed to retain the collages' generosity of scale and full-arm drawing, but somehow lost their clarity and spatial pulse. Everything flattened and slackened across the surface no matter how much Krasner accented with contrasts of dark and light or superheated hues. Broken patches of color, further interrupted by liberal amounts of raw canvas, emphasize the evenhanded drawing rhythms—rhythms that recall the insistent single-plane repetitions of the Little Images, albeit at a much larger scale. I kept thinking of Helen Frankenthaler's fresh, uninhibited, and strangely allusive abstractions of the early 1950s, with their glowing expanses of color and shifting, evocative spaces, and thinking even more, because of their more overt relationship to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Krasner's swirling compositions, of Grace Hartigan's boisterous, high-colored canvases of the same period. Krasner (along with Pollock and Clement Greenberg) is said to have recommended these much younger women, "the Second Generation of the New York School," to her friends John Bernard Myers and Tibor de Nagy when they were forming their gallery in 1950. Was the older painter now looking to the next generation for guidance?

If so, Frankenthaler's exhilarating poetic virtuosity and Hartigan's all-stops-out intensity eluded Krasner. Her paintings of the mid- and late-1950s always seem to be on the verge of becoming better than they are, but in the end—at least to my eye—they stay politely on the surface, instead of entering into some sort of invigorating argument (even *sotto voce*) between literal flatness and incipient allusion or illusion. The large monochrome canvases that followed, with their dry, loopy drawing and austere raw-umber palette, seem to flatten out even more, reading in terms of a relaxed regularity, rather than a subtly inflected, robust all-overness. Krasner's reintroduction of hot, contrasting color in the 1960s may have been intended to counteract this, to create a new kind of dynamism. But lively as the drawing and the disposition of loosely bounded shapes are in a picture such as *Gaea* (1966, MOMA)—which seems to be Krasner's most ambitious painting of the period—the energy is pretty well cancelled by the sameness of hue, intensity, and density of each "hit" of hot pink across the organizing structure of purple-black, white, and faint ochre echoes. Dynamic balance risks tilting towards inertness. (Krasner's color is badly served by the catalogue reproductions, which are uniformly dull, although the reduction in size sometimes helps her composition.)

The increasing clarity of Krasner's paintings of the 1970s—described by Hobbs as "Minimalist Abstract Expressionism"—may simply have been her response to the broad fields of relatively uninflected color typical of much of the abstract painting of the late 1960s and early 1970s, or it could signal her renewed interest in Matisse (whose sparse paintings of the mid-1930s and late cut-outs are both invoked). It could also have been, quite simply, the result of Krasner's effort to explore some of the not-yet travelled directions suggested by her own first experiments with large-scale collage in the 1950s.

The painter, in fact, returned to collage in the late 1970s, this time using as her point of departure a batch of the charcoal drawings she made at the Hofmann school, reassembling their shifting transparencies and jangling planes to suggest simultaneously both space and pattern. As in her earlier collage paintings, Krasner counteracted the implicit spatial complexities of her assemblages of Hofmann drawings with big, simplified moves, often disciplining her lively, newly reconstituted images into a fairly large-scale grid. *To the North* (1980, Pollock-Krasner Foundation), which deploys more painterly images—here cannibalized from a suite of Krasner's lithographs—points tantalizingly towards a new translation of the implications of the late collages into "pure" painting terms again, perhaps to be stiffened by a new taste for both clarity and flux. Hobbs makes much of these pictures, but not for the reasons you might think. He sees them as sharing affinities with the patchwork or tile imagery of first generation feminist artists such as Miriam Schapiro, whom Krasner knew since she was the wife of Pollock's friend and fellow painter Paul Brach. (Why this association would predispose Krasner to be influenced by Schapiro is another matter.) Hobbs also sees Krasner's recycling of drawings made under Hofmann's tutelage as a postmodernist critique of modernism, although I must admit I can't quite follow his grammatical analogy: "In this series," Hobbs writes, "[Krasner] dispenses with Hofmann's universally oriented modernist grammar as she raises the question of artistic language to a new level in which her German teacher's modernism becomes the object, but not the subject of the new works of art."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Hobbs's absurd contention that Krasner was a proto-postmodernist notwithstanding, the painter emerges from her retrospective as very much representative of her times. The testimony of her work makes plain that she struggled to come to grips with the same multivalent concerns that fueled her more highly acclaimed male colleagues. Like them, she seems to have attempted to synthesize such sometimes contradictory elements as the legacies of Cubism and Surrealism, mythology and modernity, intuition and consciousness. Krasner emerges, too, despite the shifts within her long evolution, as a rather single-minded painter with a fairly consistent vocabulary of circular, self-generating shapes and an even more consistent palette of mostly saturated, hot colors, set off by murky earth tones. The scale of her elements can shift, edges can become cleaner or more blurry, shapes can fray or clarify into smooth expanses, but the essential impulse towards abstract, painterly images that embody a particular personality—which can serve as a shorthand description of the wellspring of Abstract Expressionism—remains unchanged over the nearly fifty years of Krasner's painting life.

Hobbs does not agree and backs up his contention with an examination of Krasner's statements about her work, such as the one she prepared in 1965 for the catalogue of her first retrospective exhibition, organized for London's Whitechapel Gallery by Bryan Robertson.

> Painting, for me, when it really "happens," is as miraculous as any natural phenomenon—as say a lettuce leaf. By "happens" I mean the painting in which the inner aspect of man and his outer aspects interlock. . . . The painting I have in mind, painting in which inner and outer are inseparable, transcends technique, transcends subject and moves into the realm of the inevitable—then you have the lettuce leaf.

A straightforward enough declaration, you will say, an echo of the debates of the artist's generation about the role of the unconscious in the creative process, sparked with a vivid, unexpected simile that makes Krasner's point about a powerful painting's seeming to be an inevitable, unignorable fact of existence specially memorable. The ideal thing, at this point, would be to go back and look at the work, to see if it "happens," by Krasner's own standards. For Hobbs, however, nothing is that simple. "Taken on face value," he writes of Krasner's comments,

> the statement would appear to support a belief in an essential self in which inner and outer worlds reinforce opposite sides of a permeable membrane, representing the artists's inner and outer worlds. But if one considers a lettuce leaf as a fragile element of a larger entity, then each internally and externally consistent leaf, which might be construed as synonymous with one of Krasner's discrete styles, is broken away, one after another, over a period of time.

He ends up justifying the painter's catchy simile by wondering if she wasn't referring to a series of photographs of cabbage leaves by Edward Weston.

Krasner deserves better—anyone does. By all reports, she was a real presence in the New York art world of the 1940s and 1950s, intelligent, hard-headed, and forceful, and to substitute contemporary postures for Krasner's deep connections with the intellectual, political, and aesthetic issues of her own exciting era is to rob her of her place in it. Even if she ultimately proved not to be one of the very rare, very great painters of the Abstract Expressionist generation, she was a more than respectable artist whose work demands to be taken seriously—as she herself took the whole enterprise of painting—and looked at attentively, without a filter of preconception or dogma. If you do that at the Brooklyn Museum retrospective, giving the paintings precedence over the ubiquitous wall texts, Krasner's strengths and distinctive personality will announce themselves.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Gallery chronicle

by Daniel Kunitz

Though he often worked in both marble and bronze, Jean Arp (1886–1966) infused all his efforts with a lightness not to be mistaken for mere humor. His was a buoyant, amused, and somewhat wry approach to making, which resulted from an essentially comic view of life; it is this lightness, I suspect, that allows us to appreciate Arp's work beyond the local contexts of Dada, Surrealism, and Abstraction-Création. "Line and Form" at Mitchell-Innes & Nash—October 12 to November 18—brought together thirty-two works, which found the artist flitting from painting and collage to sculpture, drawing, even embroidery. Arp often favored the juxtaposition of hard edges with round and curving lines. His white marble sculpture *Miroir Polyvalent* (1963) looks from one side like the smooth, ovoid back of a head; on another side, the artist cut facets into the marble, leaving the broad planes of a cubist face. In fact, the marble sculptures, with their weight and solidity, their texture, and the white purity of the stone itself, seemed to my eye more consistently interesting than the easier beauty, which at times lapsed into glib facility, that Arp achieved in his bronzes. Still, one must admire the exquisitely undulating, feminine lines of all his sculptures. Oddly enough for a man who helped inaugurate the Dada movement, Arp's Brancusian lines bespeak an aesthete's delight in biomorphic forms: he picked out some of nature's most compelling shapes—often the human form—refined them, and rendered them in three dimensions.

That same attention to nature's contours informed the delicate ink drawings on view, and many of the collages and paintings. *Profil* (1955), in paint on board, presents a yellow bloom of pigment surmounting a thin stem or neck, with a smaller, amoeboid shape cut into it, all against a black ground. The larger bloom suggests a person's head, while the *mise-en-abîme*, in this case the literal use of a deeper plane where the smaller shape is cut in, indicates the profile of the work's title. Alluding to the human figure in his use of shapes, Arp nevertheless maintained the abstract character of the work by employing strongly contrasting colors: black and a bright yellow-green, a hue that calls attention to itself while denying naturalism.

Arp never lost the impish character of his beginnings. In *Feuille* (1929), a ground of light beige oil paint supports a rope—also painted beige—arranged in two concentric circles with a bulb-like shape affixed inside the smaller circle. A deft assemblage, the work also makes a sly joke by using the three-dimensional rope to represent an essentially two-dimensional leaf. Similarly, *Pieces to Be Arranged According to the Laws of Chance* (1960–1966), in which seemingly random shapes of cut-out paper lie strewn across the bottom of a glass-topped box, tends to be regarded as a late instance of the sort of aleatory compositional practices first

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

used by the Dadaists. It turns out, though, that the pieces of paper repeat only three carefully chosen, complimentary biomorphic shapes, and that chance could not have arranged them because none of the pieces of paper overlap or touch. Here, too, Arp demonstrated his preference for beauty over statement, wit over theory.

Obsessed by light rather than lightness, Richard Pousette-Dart (1916–1992) had a heavy, brooding, at times mystical sensibility. He seemed to take to heart Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko's 1943 statement: "only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless"—if the tragedy is understood as Aristotelian. "Painting to Paper Black to White"—at Knoedler & Company from October 4 to November 11—offered a survey of later works in what is perhaps his finest mode, his paintings in black and white. Also on view were twenty-five notebooks from various periods of Pousette-Dart's career, the largest such gathering ever shown.

I must confess that while I can respect Pousette-Dart's heavily impastoed color abstractions, I've never *liked* them very much. He never struck me as being as fine a colorist as such contemporaries as Pollock, de Kooning, or Rothko. Painting in black and white allowed Pousette-Dart to exploit his particularly fetishistic imagery—circles and totemic symbols—and move away from the colors and exaggerated textures that dominated his other paintings. *Untitled (Pencil)* (1975–76), a subtle and engrossing abstract work of acrylic and pencil on linen stretched over an upright rectangular support, makes use of varying thicknesses of paint, but here the artist harmonizes the build-up with an all-over skein of thin, frenzied pencil marks. Thicker areas of acrylic emphasize the literal plane of the canvas, as lighter pencil marks draw the eye to a somewhat deeper plane.

The most representational work on view, *Eye of the Night* (1978), in acrylic on paper, embraces the natural while reducing its elements to form and brightness. A small white moon surrounded by a faint aura floats off-center in a cosmic black rectangle flecked with white. Obviously an image of the moon in the night sky, the work functions equally well as an abstract study of a circle on a black ground. The interplay of reflected and absorbed light—especially where the tiny, star-like white flecks create distant constellations—enlivens the meditative composition. *Ramification Radiant Energy* (1992) doesn't use light so much as it seeks to represent its waves and pulses. Its central image—a circle (actually a complex of concentric circles) touched at its tangents by four sweeping arcs, sitting inside a large diamond—recalls a Native American god's eye. "[A] vibrant subliminal personal hieroglyph," as one phrase culled from the notebooks puts it. Inked crosshatchings and furious black lines deployed across the whole surface of the paper seem to extend from the dense pupil of black ink at its center. Pousette-Dart had the uncanny ability to make his black lines suggest the patterns formed by iron filings placed near a magnet, which is, in fact, an apt representation of radiant energy. What's most strange and affecting about these works is how they imply the energy of light while keeping its effects to a minimum.

Filled with color studies, drawings, scribblings, and snippets of thought in free verse, the notebooks opened an illuminating window on Pousette-Dart's habits of thought, his methods, and his concerns. Of particular interest were the Rorschachian color blots made by closing a blank page on wet paint. These oft-repeated experiments hearken back to the influence of Surrealist theories of the unconscious on American artists during World War II, while, at the same time, providing insight on Pousette-Dart's compositional practices in the last twenty years of his life.

As with Arp and Pousette-Dart, Surrealism had an enduring impact on the multifarious undertakings of Henri Michaux (1899–1984). Born in Belgium, Michaux is known primarily as a writer, but began dabbling in the visual arts in his early twenties. "I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wanted to draw the moments which end to end make life, to show the inner phrase, the wordless phrase, the sinuous strand that unwinds indefinitely and is intimately present in each inner and outer event," he wrote. In New York this Fall, one could find Michaux on the Upper East Side, in Midtown, and in Soho, as three galleries mounted exhibitions of his unique and varying output. Michael Werner Gallery presented—September 21 to November 25—some sixty works on paper from the 1940s to the 1970s, Zabriskie has "Watercolors and Gouaches" until December 20, and The Drawing Center is showing—also until December 20—"Untitled Passages by Henri Michaux," a similarly broad and enticing survey of his work. From the 1920s through the early 1940s, Michaux, who was untrained as an artist, painted representational works in watercolor and gouache on paper. The spindly, dream-like forms of shrubbery and strong colors in *Paysage aux deux Animaux* (undated) attest to the influence of Yves Tanguy and André Masson. In the mid-1940s, Michaux began painting washed-out faintly biomorphic abstractions. The watery, muted colors, uncertain forms, and tentative, often shaky lines of the early paintings gave way to more solid colors and a hand that, though still jumpy and urgent, was less anxious than before. Of the early washes, the best tantalizingly resemble the eroded lines of ancient petroglyphs or the faintly visible under-drawings of an X-rayed painting. His mature paintings deploy worm-like, almost intestinal lines of paint and fluid color contrails, and, like streaks of light, brighter colors such as magenta and yellow appear.

Michaux's youthful interest in Chinese ideograms informed the evolution of his quirky ink drawings. To depict the "wordless phrase," he created pseudo-calligraphies, marks that evoke ideograms but signify nothing. A series of seven sheets of paper with grids of tiny images, *Untitled (Alphabet)* (1944), in India ink on paper, groups playful and idiosyncratic versions of insects, thumbnail abstractions, calligraphic pictograms, and meaningless symbols. In 1951, Michaux extended this project in a large series called *Mouvements*, with each of its many pages covered with a different family of calligraphic marks and symbols. Alongside his faux orthographies, the artist also made larger, single-sheet drawings and paintings in ink. One finds completely abstract compositions, some calling to mind Pollock's abstract works in ink, others prefiguring Richard Serra's black paintings. In some, the drips and strokes resolve into recognizable forms such as the fish in *Untitled* (1925) and the human figures in *Untitled* (1961). Frequently, Michaux proceeded by "rhyming" marks, so that snaking lines morph into calligraphies, which in turn become stylized deer from a cave painting or blurry human shapes. For instance, in *Peinture à l'encre de Chine* (1962), in India ink and sepia on paper, thinly inked lines veer between false ideograms and human stick figures. Dark brown splashes of sepia laid over lighter sepia washes create the illusion of depth, causing the work to hover uncertainly—albeit quite beautifully—on the boundary between abstraction and representation.

During the 1950s, Michaux experimented with mescaline and, from those experiences, he produced a series of "Post-mescaline drawings," made not under the drug's influence, but rather as recollections of it. Perhaps because drug use makes for a good story, these works receive, in my opinion, far more analysis than they merit. Amorphous and fuzzy, the drawings (usually in pencil or ink) record in a nervous, scrawling hand the "awful, convulsive experience" of having his "tempo" changed by the drug. Their obsessive and disordered patterns suggest such curiosities as magnified Navajo sand paintings and strands of genetic material. One could see examples of Michaux's mescaline-influenced work at all three of his recent shows, and one might possibly appreciate them as documents of a once rare experience that has become all too common. As art, they offer few pleasures and little upon which to reflect.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Music

Onstage politics

by Patrick J. Smith

Capital punishment has long been a vexatious problem in American society, and one commented on widely as an example of American brutality by those in other countries. The putting to death of certain convicted criminals was once more or less the norm in the United States, but various pressures—not least the publication of the horrors of botched executions and sacrifices of the innocent—led to its abolition in many states. In the past twenty years, however, the death penalty has returned, and the debate has been refueled, most recently by Governor George Ryan of Illinois, who last year declared a moratorium on executions in that state.

Sister Helen Prejean of St. Joseph of Medaille was working with underprivileged children in her native Louisiana when she became involved with the question of capital punishment, and that question has come to dominate her life. In 1993, she wrote *Dead Man Walking* (a phrase used in San Quentin when the prisoner is being led to execution). It centers on two brutal killers, but encompasses the whole subject of capital punishment and the people—victims, families, prison guards—who surround it. The book indicted the system, and was partly adapted in a movie of the same name. The harrowing immediacy of the film won for Susan Sarandon, as Sister Helen, the 1995 Academy Award as Best Actress, and the nomination for Best Actor of Sean Penn, who played the killer. This book has now been made the subject of an opera, to a libretto by the noted dramatist Terrence McNally and to music by the San Francisco composer Jake Heggie, with Susan Graham as Sister Helen, the baritone John Packard as the killer, and Frederica von Stade as the killer's mother.[1]

Sister Helen in the book did not take the easy road, and the movie followed suit. She became the spiritual advisor to men who were undoubted killers, and who had committed brutal deeds in their slaughter. The killer of the movie and the opera—here called Joseph De Rocher—with his brother set upon a teenage couple in the woods, raped the girl and shot and knifed both. As the girl's father says, "They stabbed her 37 times in the throat. . . . We couldn't find her senior pin. It was buried so deep in the cuts." The brother, because of a better lawyer, received a life sentence; Joe was given the death penalty. As the spiritual advisor chosen by the prisoner, Sister Helen was required to be with him up to his execution, which she witnessed.

In the book, and also in the movie, she admits to mistakes: one, in not seeing the parents of the victim at an early stage. The trauma of the event for these secondary victims can be, in its own way, almost as brutal: divorce often results or a run to implacable, "eye for an eye" hatred. The

1 *Dead Man Walking*, by Jake Heggie, premiered at The San Francisco Opera on October 7, 2000.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

justified rage these people feel toward Sister Helen, for siding with "a monster," is well-depicted, and made more immediate because the families are themselves Catholic.

In the opera, Owen Hart, the father of one of the victims (strongly sung by Robert Orth), encapsulates this rage. The final scene of the movie suggests a reconciliation between Sister Helen and this grieving figure, and in his libretto McNally also suggests this, however tentatively, with Hart's parting words to Sister Helen: "Come visit. And soon." One remains to be convinced, however, that reconciliation will be possible.

McNally's libretto is taut and well-constructed, moving inexorably from its prologue to Sister Helen's first visit—after a long, hot drive, to the Louisiana State Prison at Angola—to the execution itself. He has begun the opera with a prologue in pantomime, which graphically shows the murders in all their brutality, thus leaving no question of guilt.

Where McNally has differed to a degree from the movie and the book is in his emphasis—surely dramaturgically justified—on Joe accepting and recognizing his own guilt. For most of the opera, Joe refuses to acknowledge his own culpability, either blaming his brother for the killings or ranting against the state for making him a sacrifice. It is this blind obstinacy that alienates everyone even more than the actual crime; he is seen as a monster devoid of humanity. The pardon board coldly refuses to reconsider the verdict. But Sister Helen believes with Leos Janáček that in every creature there is a spark of the divine, and her efforts with Joe lead to a second-act duet, the central point if not the emotional center of the opera. Joe relives, finally, the events of that night, and admits his guilt. This in turn leads him to ask forgiveness of the parents, as he lies strapped to the gurney before the lethal injection.

Jake Heggie is a young composer who is best-known for the songs he has written for a variety of famous singers.[2] He writes easily and fluidly (especially for the female voice) and in his writing suggests popular music styles. Yet what quickly became apparent was that, with this subject and treatment, Heggie was compositionally and emotionally out of his depth. There is precious little individuality of voice in his music-making, and when the big moments come he relies on percussion and brass fustian. Given the innate power of the story and its almost inevitable unfolding, this musically menacing underpinning has a certain vitality, particularly when combined with some self-contained songs woven into the texture. The first act works better than the second because of this. But when we come to the two big duets of the second act—the first a nocturnal conversation between Sister Helen and Sister Rose and the second the aforementioned traversal of the killings—Heggie cannot lift his music to the heightened demands of the libretto. The first duet, low-keyed but intense, proceeds well enough, though the music does little to illuminate the words, but the crucial second falls flat, refusing to become anything like a moment of transfiguration and unburdening which leads inexorably to the ceremony of death.

The cast and production team were very well-chosen, and the opera benefited from the abilities of the conductor Patrick Summers, who is certainly one of opera's better young maestros. The director Joe Mantello has worked extensively with Terrence McNally, and his straightforward, no-nonsense handling of characters onstage shows his affinity for the kind of gritty realism that is the hallmark of the American director. Michael Yeargan's sets—essentially piled building blocks of gray to suggest the bleakness and forbidding isolation of a prison—reinforce the power of the final journey.

Susan Graham, as Sister Helen, was of course at the center of events and was onstage most of the evening. The unhistrionic emotionality that she must not only

2 A selection of Heggie's songs has appeared on the album *The Faces of Love* (BMG 63484), which includes such renowned singers as Renée Fleming, Sylvia McNair, and Jennifer Larmore.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

possess but also radiate plays to her strengths as a singing actress. Her quiet forcefulness became ever more powerful with each scene, so that one could understand why Joe, in its continual presence, would finally capitulate to her spiritual certainty. Graham's performance, then, was the outstanding element of the evening. John Packard, as Joe De Rocher, similarly brought his tortured character to life, and slowly saw it fuse into becoming subordinate to Sister Helen's will, so that the last moments of communication became touching. Frederica von Stade took the role of Joe's mother, and her talents turned a minor role into something larger. Yet it must be said that—good as she was—von Stade never shed her aura of patrician style (which indeed has defined so many of her character assumptions over the years) to become a mousy, lower-class, single mother, struggling to bring up two children, frightened and bewildered in the world she is compelled to enter. The large supporting cast contributed strongly to the cumulative power of the story.

One interesting footnote is that, in Sister Helen's book, the condemned men were executed by electrocution—the procedure at that time in Louisiana. That death can be especially gruesome, as Sister Helen details. Since then, Louisiana has become a lethal injection state, and it is this method that is anachronistically employed in the opera. Lethal injection is supposedly a more humane way of carrying out the court's mandate, but whatever it is in reality the procedure is certainly much more stage-conscious than the electric chair. The arms are spread-eagled, and when the gurney is tilted upwards the victim appears to be crucified—with all of its attendant symbolic messages. In fact, the San Francisco staging was not the first such "message" to be sent operatically: Peter Sellars created a similar effect in the harrowing finale to his *Theodora* at Glyndebourne a few seasons back, where two martyrs were similarly crucified by lethal injection. The difference, however, was that in that instance the music was by Handel.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The media

Complicity, objectivity & stupidity

by James Bowman

For connoisseurs of historical irony, the election—still undecided as I write—has provided one of the best things to come along since Bill Clinton's signing into law the statute under the provisions of which (involving an accused sexual harasser's past behavior) he was himself investigated to within an inch of his political life by Kenneth Starr. For months Al Gore had run a campaign which subtly and not-so-subtly suggested that George W. Bush was at best not up to the job of president and at worst a fool (the press was particularly helpful in establishing this idea in the popular mind). Then, when it appeared that he had lost Florida and therefore the election by a heartbreakingly small margin, Gore suddenly discovered the cause of the 19,000 "disenfranchised" voters in Palm Beach County who had spoiled their ballot papers by being too stupid to know that you couldn't vote for more than one candidate for the same office. In other words, he eagerly seized on the hope that it might be the Morons for Gore who would finally put him over the top.

Not that Gore was ever very persuasive in the first place as the champion of intellect. The dirty secret of American electoral politics, and the one that no one in the media dare disclose, is that it is now, post-Clinton, post-Dick Morris, entirely constructed on the assumption that the voters *are* morons. Always, of course, the art of political success in a democracy has been based on the ability to simplify. But always before the registers of political discourse have been various, including not only bumper-sticker slogans and thirty-second television spots for the base vulgar but also more nuanced and thoughtful statements of policy intended for more sophisticated audiences. The debates in October only confirmed what was already apparent, that politicians can no longer afford any statement more sophisticated than a bumper sticker, often added as the punch line to a prologue of mathematical mystification.

This was why Bush's alleged stupidity, whether real or feigned, turned out to be his secret weapon in the election. The more that Gore and the Democrats strenuously hinted and finally came right out and said that their opponents' standard bearer was an idiot, the more they confirmed that he was just exactly the man to whom their own campaign had been designed to appeal. Why would the morons of America vote for the supercilious show-off and braggart Gore, who was reminding them at every turn of his superiority to them, rather than one of their own—especially when the Gore campaign (like the Bush campaign) amounted to a tacit admission that the morons of America were in the driver's seat? Yet Gore could not acknowledge as much without undermining his whole campaign.

The press has also had to remain silent, but for different reasons. For one thing, coverage of politics is dominated by the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"investigative" worldview, which involves the assumption that the candidates' public faces are not their real ones, and that the essential task performed by journalists under our constitution is to tell the people what politicians *really* mean when they say or do something. Sometimes spoken of by the *bien pensant* as "cynicism," this attitude is actually the reverse of cynical, at least in the sense that what stands out about it is the naïveté of its assumption that the journalist is *ipso facto* a better reality-detector than either the politician or his readers, the benighted slobs who have to have explained to them what the politicians really mean. Politicians and journalists are therefore complicit in treating the general public as stupid.

Investigative assumptions united with competitive pressures also make modern political campaigns, from the journalists' point of view, into a "gaffe" hunt. This is especially true for Republican candidates. A journalist will in a pinch make use of a Democratic gaffe if he has nothing better to write about, but this is a decidedly inferior and less-valued sort of gaffe in the view of those who are themselves overwhelmingly Democratic in their sympathies. But the habit of gaffe-seeking gives politicians of both parties a powerful incentive to play it safe, to be as bland and simplistic and platitudinous as possible.

Once again, credit must be given to the brilliance of the Bush campaign in managing the media. Recognizing that the main business of electioneering now is to avoid saying or doing anything excessively stupid or embarrassing, the Bush camp appeared to have adopted for dealing with the media's gaffe patrol the Machiavellian strategy of saying stupid and embarrassing things all the time, so that people would grow used to them. By the end of the campaign, the threshold of stupid and embarrassing for Bush was so high that he would positively have had to drool and gibber in order to lose votes for this reason. He realized early on that, where the show was designed to appeal to the stupid, it actually helps to be thought of as stupid yourself.

Here an aside on one example of how the gaffe patrol works. This came early in the campaign with the great "rats" controversy, which was touched off when someone with clearly way too much time on his hands watched a Bush television ad so slowed down that he could detect the word "rats" —a ghost image left over from "Bureaucrats"—on the screen for a thirtieth of a second. That in itself might have been open to the objection that if the worst that Bush was willing to say about his opponents was that they were "rats" he was either being charitable or insincere. What really made the "rats" affair a nationwide *cause célèbre* was the ingenious notion that it was an attempt at "subliminal" advertising. The very idea of "subliminal advertising" is an urban legend dating back to the 1950s, but it was enough to get a few days' worth of news out of—and the embarrassment to Bush was prolonged when he mistakenly pronounced the word "subliminal" as "subliminable."

But was it really as embarrassing as the press seemed to think? Not when you consider the unlikelihood that a single vote was changed by Bush's mistaken pronunciation of "subliminal" whereas many could have been changed by whatever it was that the journalistic fraternity might have been reporting on instead. Moreover, the decoy value of constant verbal screw-ups—*Slate* devoted an entire column to the "Bushism of the Day"—was enhanced late in the campaign when Gore himself tried to make electoral capital out of Bush's mistaken suggestion that Social Security was not a government program. Gore even spent precious ad dollars trying to persuade voters of the journalistic view that such a mistake was a relevant datum to them in deciding by whom they were to be governed. One can never know for sure, but I doubt that anyone not already a Gore supporter was won over.

This is not to say that Bush could spin all his gaffes the other way. When on the Thursday before the election the news was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

leaked by a Democratic party loyalist in Maine that Bush had been arrested there twenty-four years ago for drunken driving, the timing of the revelation was obviously calculated to inflict the maximum damage on Bush. The tightening in the polls in the few days remaining suggests that it did hurt him, too. But even here, journalists' attempts to hype the news into a "bombshell" that exploded with "megaton force," as Howard Kurtz of *The Washington Post* put it, may have worked in Bush's favor. An instant ABC poll found that "Only seven percent of all likely voters say the arrest raises serious concern in their minds about whether Bush is qualified to be president, and virtually all of them favor Gore anyway." Treating this as the Golden Gaffe that would bring about a dramatic reversal may have struck voters as just piling on.

But the main reason for the triumph of stupidity in our national life is the shibboleth of journalistic "objectivity" that will not allow the otherwise keenly observant reporter or commentator to point out with the force it deserves either stupidity or dishonesty, lest he be seen as openly taking sides. Secretly, of course, he takes sides all the time, and it may just be worth mentioning again the often-cited Roper Center poll of 1995 which found that 89 percent of Washington-based journalists and bureau chiefs voted for Bill Clinton in 1992 and only 7 percent for George Bush senior. But the secret, one suspects, must be kept even from himself, which is why he is so pathologically defensive about his objectivity.

Evidence of this defensiveness was provided on the eve of the election by Jack Shafer, the deputy editor of *Slate*. In a piece titled "The God of Objectivity is Dead," he wrote that

> Starting with an opinion is considered to be good science, but it is considered by many to be bad journalism. A good journalist, it is imagined—even by some journalists—starts with a mental tabula rasa. Any preconceptions amount to bias. But in fact, good journalists work the way good scientists do. . . . Included in the baggage that most journalists bring to their work is an ideological predisposition. There are those who believe it is possible for a journalist to purge herself of all opinion about the world before showing up for work every day. I am not one of them. The test of a good journalist, like a good scientist, is not whether she has a predisposition but whether she is willing to abandon or modify it on the basis of evidence and argument.
>
> One difference, however, between scientists and journalists is that scientists lay bare their hypotheses and predispositions before they test them. By contrast, even very good journalists cling to the pretense that if they refuse to reveal their predispositions, this means they don't have any.

Shafer then went on to propose a sort of challenge. The staff at *Slate* would all reveal their voting intentions while asking prominent political reporters working for other outlets throughout the country to do the same. He announced in advance his expectation that the exercise would

> confirm that the press corps is overrepresented by yellow dog . . . well, golden ocher Democrats. Most of them are for abortion rights, against school vouchers, for government regulation, against drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, for national health care, against unlimited money in campaigns, for gun control, against privatizing Social Security, for higher taxes. In a word, for Al Gore.

This, it should be said, was not an expectation based on mere guesswork. To start with, *Slate* itself was found to be staffed overwhelmingly by Gore Democrats. Thirty-one contributors proclaimed themselves more or less enthusiastic Gore-ites while only four (including a publisher and associate publisher) admitted to preferring Bush. In addition there were three votes for Nader and two (including Shafer's own) for the libertarian Harry Browne. I wonder if

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the magazine would have thought of trying this if Shafer had supported, say, Al Gore? As Michael Kinsley, the editor of *Slate* and one of the Gore supporters, explained in his weekly column, "Fear of confirming conservative suspicions about the liberal predisposition of the media is probably the main reason other journalists will resist following our lead."

He was right. Of the thirty-three prominent journalists whose views he had canvassed, those who had responded to Shafer by two days after the election—including Walter Isaacson of *Time*, Joe Klein of *The New Yorker*, William Powers of *National Journal*, Bob Davis of *The Wall Street Journal*, Michael Isikoff of *Newsweek*, Jodie Allen of *U.S. News and World Report*, and Maureen Dowd and Joseph Lelyveld of *The New York Times*—were unanimous in being unwilling to disclose their votes. One of them, Powers, wrote:

> A world in which every hack's work is labeled for its hidden ingredients, like a can of soup —"White House correspondent Jane Smith is a socially liberal, fiscally conservative married heterosexual who voted for Bill Clinton twice though she personally detests him and has bottomless admiration for Hillary, with the exception of health care and several other issues. As for school vouchers, Smith is quite torn . . ."—that's a world I don't want to live in. Many of the journalists on your hit list are interesting in part because we don't know their leanings. The mystery of Maureen Dowd's "true" beliefs is one of the things that draws us back to her work again and again, and I'd hate to read a clinical rundown of her politics.

For the record, Miss Dowd herself replied, simply, "none of your beeswax, you nosey parker."

But to suppose that there is any "mystery" whatsoever about Maureen Dowd's politics is absurd. Any attentive reader could give at least as detailed a rundown of what she believes as Powers provides for the fictional Jane Smith. The problem is not that she, or the others who replied to Shafer, won't admit to us what they believe; it's that they won't admit it to themselves and take it into account in their reporting and commentary. To write as if they have no bias and are Olympian observers from so far above the battle that their opinions, if they have any at all, are an irrelevance is a fundamental dishonesty which distorts and corrupts not only all that they have to say but, with it, the whole of our public discourse.

Those who did not respond to Jack Shafer's survey were probably caught up in the wonderful story that the election turned out to be, which carried with it as an inevitable concomitant the customary hand-wringing about the media's own mistakes. The rather comical mess that the networks made of their election-night coverage was described with the imprimatur of "many in academia, politics and the news media" by *The New York Times* as "perhaps the most egregious election-night gaffes in the modern television era." The *Times* itself, it said, let slip 115,000 copies ("out of a total of 1.1 million") of its early edition with the headline: "Bush Appears to Defeat Gore." Seeking safety in numbers, it insisted that "*The Miami Herald*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *USA Today*, and *The Austin American-Statesman* in Texas—Mr. Bush's hometown paper—were among others reporting the phantom victory."

But if you read a little further down in the article you discover that the words "appears to" did not actually make it into the story. "Unfortunately, the story didn't include the qualifier. It slipped through the cracks. Somebody pushed the button on a lead that wasn't qualified," said Bill Keller, the paper's managing editor, to his own reporters. The feebleness of the explanation was one measure of the *Times*'s morbid defensiveness, also on display just over a month earlier when it ran an extraordinary editorial on the inside front page half-apologizing for its reporting of the Wen Ho Lee case even as it insisted that "on the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

whole, we remain proud of work that brought into the open a major national security problem of which officials had been aware for months, even years."

This was an almost Clintonian sort of "mistakes were made" apology and suggested that the paper's sense of its own honor was rather more presidential than journalistic. But perhaps that's the price you pay for being the "newspaper of record," staffed by the likes of Joseph Lelyveld and Maureen Dowd who are beyond even the presidential in their detachment from the opinions of the mob. But they, too, have their god-like concerns in preserving from taint the sanctity of their professionalism. As Toby Harnden of the London *Daily Telegraph* put it to readers perhaps as much confused about American journalistic as American electoral practices, "American journalists seem to specialise in taking themselves seriously. Accusing a media organisation of 'bad journalism' is like calling a doctor negligent. The inquests will go on for months."

Oddly, in all this soul-searching, the one thing you can be sure will never be considered is the obvious solution to the problem that has inspired it. This would be an embargo on the reporting of election results until all the votes are counted. The "professionals" of the media would never agree to that. Doubtless, too, they would be able to find a federal judge to agree with them—someone who can see in the penumbra of the rights outlined in the First Amendment the right of journalists to strut their self-importance before the nation every election night.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Verse chronicle

Author! author!

by William Logan

John Ashbery's nonsense is a lot more amusing than most poets' sense. What he does well is nearly inimitable, as the mutilated bodies of his imitators show (what he does badly nearly anyone can do, though most poets wouldn't even try). In the past decade, as old age has stolen upon him, he has published over nine-hundred pages of poetry—if there were a poetry Olympics, Ashbery would take gold, silver, and bronze, as well as brass, antimony, tin, and lead. He turned seventy-three this year—when did poetry have a more boyish septuagenarian? Will Ashbery ever grow up?

In *Your Name Here*[1] (a witty title that reminds us of all the sneaky things he can do with language), Ashbery has started making sense. This will come as a shock to most readers, because his poetry has lived a long time on the subsidizing strategies of sense without making much sense at all—Ashbery writes poems that promise everything and deliver nothing. He's the original bait-and-switch merchant, the prince of Ponzi schemes. Over and over, you're lured into a poem, following along dutifully in your poetry reader's way; then the trap door swings open and you're dumped into a pit of malarkey—or a pile of meringue. And that has been the pleasure.

When Ashbery's new poems mean, this is the sort of meaning they make:

Terminal

Didn't you get my card?
We none of us, you see, knew we were coming
until the bus was actually pulling out of the terminal.
I gazed a little sadly at the rubber of my shoes'
soles, finding it wanting.

I got kind of frenzied after the waiting
had stopped, but now am cool as a suburban garden
in some lost city. When it came time for my speech
I could think of nothing, of course.
I gave a little talk about the onion—how its flavor
inspires us, its shape informs our architecture.
There were so many other things I wanted to say, too,
but, dandified, I couldn't strut,
couldn't sit down for all the spit and polish.
Now it's your turn to say something about the wall
in the garden. It can be anything.

Isn't this a little, well, sentimental? Isn't it a little, well, boring? Some of Ashbery's sweet slippages of meaning are here, but only in the most desultory, attenuated fashion.

Ashbery had, and still has intermittently, a beautiful gift for language—very few poets since Shakespeare have so expanded the working vocabulary of poetry. Ashbery pil-

1 *Your Name Here*, by John Ashbery; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 127 pages, $23.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fers his words wherever he finds them (he's been kicked out of most of language's expensive shops and most of the thrift stores, too), and he carefully developed a style where the dizzying shifts of idiom distracted the reader with sublime little jolts or twitches of words unexpected—the banquet of meaning was indefinitely delayed. At worst this was like starving in a room of plastic fruit, but at best the permissions of the poetry were so delicious you hardly minded that an hour later you couldn't remember a line (once we had throwaway lines—we have progressed to throwaway poems). You read every poem with hope, and ended most of them feeling swindled—yet how grateful you were, at times, for being swindled.

Ashbery has made virtues of his vices, as all good poets do. In the long run, the run of centuries, the poems that will become familiar will *be* the ones that make a little sense (though "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," one of the most important poems of the last half-century, is too long to be served up by anthologies). Even if Ashbery may seem a more discreet and less divided poet in a hundred years, he has less matter behind his poetry than anyone but a devout Dadaist. The sentences fall in divine order, though an order superficial to meaning, that ignores our proprieties of meaning.

When a poet has a method, he tends to adhere to it, especially if it discharges and exhausts the imaginative pressure that precedes writing. But the reader can never feel that pressure or that satisfaction. Ashbery at his most irritating, his most frivolous and trivial, is also Ashbery in the fullest command of his talents (he doesn't have the talents a conventional poet requires). His gifts are impossible to adapt to the fulfillments of garden-variety poetry—he has to keep meaning permanently off balance (Ashbery writes the way Groucho Marx walked). Charming and witty and silly he can be till the cows come home, but he writes as if emotion were written in a language he can't understand—the language of cows.

Ashbery is still capable of vintage nuttiness ("Today a stoat came to tea/ and that was so nice it almost made me cry"), but now the nuttiness is mixed with passages strangely romantic ("My mistress' hands are nothing like these,/ collecting silken cords for a day when the wet wind plunges"), or politically wholesome ("In the end it was their tales of warring stampedes/ that finished us off. We could not go them one better/ and they knew it, and put our head on a stamp"—*our head?*), or simply, sweetly banal:

> Once upon a time there were two brothers.
> Then there was only one: myself.
>
> I grew up fast, before learning to drive,
> even. There was I: a stinking adult.
>
> I thought of developing interests
> someone might take an interest in. No soap.

However dull I thought Ashbery could be, I never thought he could be dull in the ordinary ways. Bring back the meringue! Bring back the malarkey!

"It is the author's personal challenge that shame not dictate any facet of subject matter in this volume," boasted the proofs of Yusef Komunyakaa's new book.[2] This is what a corporation would call a mission statement. The intention is plain but the words have gone a little feral—without shame, can satire exist, or irony? There are a lot of gods in *Talking Dirty to the Gods*, so it's clear why shame is on the poet's mind—he is not going to let gods define his sins for him.

Komunyakaa, who won a Pulitzer in 1995, is the sort of poet who wears his politics on his sleeve, and he has very long sleeves. His earlier books were highly sentimental examples of contemporary poetic rhetoric, the poems longwinded, personal in the impersonal way confessional poems are, political without the shiver of an

2 *Talking Dirty to the Gods*, by Yusef Komunyakaa; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 134 pages, $23.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

against-the-grain idea (when poets are political they're almost always political in the same way), and crudely and garrulously romantic. In *Talking Dirty*, Komunyakaa tries to change the terms of that poetry: each of the 132 poems is only four quatrains long, and the lines are short.

These self-imposed limitations have kept Komunyakaa from the worst of his habits. The new poems are condensed, allusive, and bite-sized. He writes of the classical poet Stesichorus:

> They say he lost his sight
> When he slandered Helen,
> Calling Paris a schoolboy
> In her faithless embrace.
>
> Seated on the wall of Troy
> With King Priam & his cronies,
> She wore cloth so thin the dead
> Could decipher faults & ruins,
>
> Naming each hero's downfall.
> The poet revised his story
> Till she never left Attica,
> Till he could almost see
>
> The curves of a breast
> Again, befuddled as a man
> Cutting off a finger each day
> To offer up for sacrifice.

These short lines, in an accentual measure that lacks even a hazy memory of Yeats, have a restraint and purpose the blowsy early poems rarely achieve. The mythical and classical poems are the most suggestive. Komunyakaa loves classics so much it's sometimes hard to tell which classics they are—one second we're reading about Lady Xoc (who must be Mayan), the next about Caesar. Some of the poems are so jammed with characters you need a scorecard to keep them apart: one dense passage throws in Billie Holiday, Edith Piaf, Betty Boop, Prometheus, and da Vinci—all in seven lines. In the next poem you get Mark, Luke, John, Ezekiel, Paul (so far so good), and then . . . Horus!

It's hard to dislike a poet who writes odes to maggots or slime mold. There's an easy ebullience (and an easier virtue) to these poems: if brevity isn't the soul of wit, it's the soul of whim. Komunyakaa uses the abbreviated form like a memo book: there are poems about infanticide, sex toys, a castrato, Genet, the plaster cast of a dog at Pompeii, a man who wants to kiss his nipples, and all seven of the deadly sins (sins so short they're like seven deadly dwarfs). Komunyakaa has a wide-ranging, devil-may-care imagination, but the poems would be better if morals weren't invisibly attached: it's odd that a poet who wants to talk dirty has the tongue of a temperance campaigner.

What would poets end up writing, without shame? (Shame is a better editor than most.) When a poet says, in a poem about pets, "After spending/ Seventeen billion on them yearly,/ No wonder they kill babies// & the homeless in their sleep," the banality of the idea is almost as depressing as the sloppiness of the logic or the language. *Them* is the pets; *they* could be masters or pets: words have a way of getting away from Komunyakaa. Here an antecedent goes astray, there the subjunctive is misused, and only the tinniest of tin ears would allow "Turn me inside out like Donne/ Desired God to do with him." The poet is given to lines like "No longer// Fat on death's fugacity" or "His right hand slides down/ To her wet sadness" or "daydreaming/ My sperm inside her all afternoon." That's as dirty as the talk gets: if Komunyakaa ever did meet a god, he'd be polite as a parson. Though these new poems sometimes have the cool politic eye of contemporary Irish poetry, Komunyakaa loves the whiny, self-conscious confessions that are American as apple pie—the pie American poets now claim as their birthright.

Gjertrud Schnackenberg's quirky, meditative version of the Oedipus myth has a musty, housebound air to it. *The Throne of Labdacus*[3] occurs in slow motion, the motion of another age, where a creaking cart

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

on a dusty road carries King Laius to his death, where pegs are slowly turned in the crossbar of a lyre (more lyres get tuned in this poem than in any poem for two-thousand years). Written in spare free-verse couplets, the poem is lit by the glow of the tidy, delicate images (like Dutch still lifes) at which Schnackenberg has long been a master:

> The first warning passing through Thebes—
> As small a sound
>
> As a housefly alighting from Persia
> And stamping its foot on a mound
>
> Where the palace once was;
> As small as a moth chewing thread
>
> In the tyrant's robe;
> As small as the cresting of red
>
> In the rim of an injured eye; as small
> As the sound of a human conceived—
>
> The god in Delphi,
> Mouthing the words;
>
> Then the god begins tuning the strings
> With the squeak of the wooden pegs.

Thus, the fall of empires. The god is Apollo, god of poetry and music, but also god of prophecy. Such images are never casual for this poet, who specializes in scale—the housefly reminds us of a later empire, just across the Aegean from Greece, an empire whose legions were turned back at Marathon. And who fought on those plains but Aeschylus, who survived to write a tragedy—the earliest we know of, though lost—on the tale of Oedipus? The moth might be called one of the accidental beneficiaries of the death of kings (though the moth larva, not the moth, feeds on clothing). The injured eye may be the blinded eye of Oedipus; but the detail of conception would seem odd, even sentimental, if we didn't recall that Oedipus was conceived in defiance of an oracle.

Our age has tried to ignore the classical myths in the century since Freud took out his notorious patent. Homer is given new translation every year (Homer but never Virgil), yet the Greek plays—closer to us in time, more distant in feeling—come only slowly into English, in part because they remain so alien, so difficult to ferry across the river of translation. Schnackenberg writes in the margins of the myth, refusing to bring us one of those jazzed-up versions of Ovid or Horace or Homer that have become a minor mode of poetic enterprise.

The dust-jacket for *The Throne of Labdacus* claims that Apollo has been "given the task" of writing the score for Sophocles's *Oedipus* (*Oedipus Tyrannus*, presumably). I was delighted to learn this, because even after two readings I couldn't puzzle this premise from the poem. Schnackenberg takes the existence of Apollo no more seriously than we do (it's hard to work up any *feeling* about Apollo), though it has been convenient for literature to keep in cold storage this alternative and miscellaneous cast of gods, from whom belief has been leached. *The Throne of Labdacus* is a warning about the nature of fate, which the Greeks believed even the gods had to obey. The Oedipus myth earns its ironies in malfeasance and blindness. The characters act in human ways for human reasons, sometimes compelling and kind—but the results are monstrous. Oedipus is fleeing the oracle when he meets and in ignorance kills his father (the earliest record of road rage); Laius, in one version, is traveling to the oracle to discover the fate of his abandoned, mutilated baby. When the revelations clatter forth years later, when Oedipus realizes he has murdered his father and slept with his mother, his self-blinding is the mirror of crime—but all the characters have been guilty of blindness.

Theirs is the general fate to which particular fates return, the fates from which no god can save us. When people stop worshipping gods, the gods die and are resur-

3 *The Throne of Labdacus*, by Gjertrud Schnackenberg; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 101 pages, $23.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rected as symbols—gods are buried in the grave of art. As the myth of Oedipus struggles down the ages, surviving the birth and death of alphabets, the long dark age (after Mycenean civilization collapsed) when writing was forgotten, Schnackenberg finds in its bloody fates the name and nature of poetry. (Who has given Apollo his task? The poet, a god above gods.) The poem, often frustratingly indirect, enacts what it pretends to study—the use of the past to comment on the present, on whatever is most mysterious, and most obdurate, in men and women.

> And engraved in miniature, undulating
> hexameters
> In gold leaf so thin it shivers on the palm:
>
> The god plucks a gold leaf from the basket
> Of oracles in the temple and reads *Drive him*
> *away*—
>
> Then crumples it into gold foil.

The beauty of the images can't quite excuse the weary labyrinth of narrative. Schackenberg is a poet of bedazzling grace and technical gift, of mature self-possession (once I called her the best American poet under forty; now she is simply one of the best we have), but this poem has her depths without her passion. It has been conceived in a museum and executed in a library.

Readers who need introduction to the moody richness of her work will want *Supernatural Love: Poems 1976–1992*,[4] a collection of her earlier books. Schnackenberg has published slowly, rarely in the current mode (she was writing formal verse before the bandwagons were drawn up to the bandbox, though her recent poetry has been in stately free verse). *Portraits and Elegies* (1982) was an astonishing debut (with Amy Clampitt's *The Kingfisher*, the most remarkable of the decade), and the following book, *The Lamplit Answer* (1985), was even better. *A Gilded Lapse of Time* (1992), though disliked by some critics, was as brilliant and disturbing as any book in recent American poetry. Schnackenberg's recent poems, including *The Throne of Labdacus*, live in the shadow of Stevens, where few American poets are content (they would rather rent space in the shadows of poets much shorter). Her poems wrestle with moral failure not in the light of philosophy but in the darkness after it. *The Throne of Labdacus* is too clenched and rarefied, but if we are to have a poetry worth the name we must have poets willing to take artistic risks and, occasionally, fail at them.

Like most of the poets in Northern Ireland, Michael Longley has received far less attention than Seamus Heaney—a contemporary of Heaney must feel like an insurance adjuster who writes poems and discovers Wallace Stevens works upstairs. Morally divided, harrowed by history, Longley's poems have been formed by the same political pressures and sundered inheritance; after a long silence in the Eighties he emerged as a more finely engraved, more emotional poet than a reader of his early work could have predicted. The poems in *The Weather in Japan*[5] are mostly miniatures (only a dozen of the nearly eighty poems are longer than sonnets), but miniatures of deep texture and fine glaze.

> Pale butterwort's smoky blue colours your
> eyes:
> I thought of this when I tried to put together
> Your every feature, but a buzzard distracted me
> As it quartered the tree-tops and added its
> skraik
> Or screel to the papery purr of the dragonflies'
> Love-flight, and with so much happening
> overhead
> I forgot the pale butterwort there on the
> ground

4 *Supernatural Love: Poems 1976–1992*, by Gjertrud Schnackenberg; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 278 pages, $19 paper.

5 *The Weather in Japan*, by Michael Longley; Wake Forest University Press, 70 pages, $18.95, $9.95 paper.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Spreading its leaves like a starfish and
digesting
Insects that squirm on each adhesive tongue
and
Feed the terror in your eyes, your smoky blue
eyes.

What might have been Yeatsian romance (Longley often falls hard for Yeats) has been tempered to terror.

The classics have roused themselves in Longley's recent work; half-a-dozen ancient poets have been absorbed into the vitality of his English, but Homer is the blind presence behind his Greek sense of fatality and necessity. He may find Homer in a dough-boy or in a child suckling; Longley has lived through war, a desultory war where the problems are national but the victims local. He has made record—not of the movement of arms that fascinated Herodotus or Xenophon—but of the quiet moments where crimes endure in the evidence of the senses, where the lowly asparagus (which Nazis did not allow the Jews to purchase) is transformed into "mouthwatering fasces." History is the ordinary that remembers the extraordinary.

Longley's poems are haunted by graveyards—there are elegies for everything in sight. Wars ancient and modern fuse in the ruptured terrain of World War I, his father's war, a war with uncomfortable significance for Ireland and Northern Ireland (Protestant and Catholic troops both fought in that war, but Eire sat out the next). Longley's attention to the rich detail of field and flower—these poems are a field guide to Irish bogs—serves the duties of memory, as if to list each flower were to honor the anonymous dead.

Longley can make a fetish of objects (though no one makes fetishes like Heaney, who has founded a whole religion of observation). His besetting vice is sentiment—for Yeats, sentiment was a besetting virtue; when his influence isn't harnessed, it goes straight for grandeur. A heavy-hearted poet sometimes wavers in pitch—Longley's not quite capable of controlling sentiment for aesthetic ends, so it sounds like a false note, half-a-tone to the wrong. The new poems can be tediously domestic (there are a lot of poems about quilts, and by that I mean more than one), murmuring over ideas so small they're just marginal scrawls, epitaphs hoping to be epigraphs, moody but monotonous (minor poets may not always be monotonous, but a major poet usually has more than one voice). Nevertheless, many of these poems have learned the lessons of war and are hard as resin.

What could turn a constipated poet like Geoffrey Hill, after poems famously given to grimaces, into a poet who gibbers with fury, who can't reach the page fast enough? *Speech! Speech!*[6] closely follows *The Triumph of Love* (1998) and *Canaan* (1996), completing the development of a voice hoarse with its own angers, its fraught attempts at communication, but jabbering like a maniac. Hill let the cat out of the bag in an interview last spring: the cat's name is Prozac.

Is style chemical? Can swallowing an amine neurotransmitter change the comprehensions of syntax a life has earned? Can the inner governings of meaning be overthrown by the palace coup of a few neurons? Hill is a poet deeply suspicious of his reader, of the compromises public speech demands. He feels—his criticism is rife with such worries—poetry too readily betrays itself for the reader, and his verse has squeezed most pleasure from its lines. A moral poet doesn't need to be styptic or mute—think of Auden, brilliant and chatty—but Hill's poetry is the Calvinist ethic made word: only the elect will labor toward meaning. "Say: coherence/ though not at any price. Would I exchange/ my best gift, say, for new spools of applause . . . ?"

It is difficult to say what *Speech! Speech!* is about—its subject is the closure of its own style ("You áre/ wantonly obscure," he says). This brute monologue, addressing shadowy figures offstage, labors through 120 sections

6 *Speech! Speech!*, by Geoffrey Hill; Counterpoint, 63 pages, $23.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of a dozen lines—as many sections as the days of Sodom, the poem helpfully tells us (the reference must be to the Marquis de Sade, not the Bible). That is perhaps the only time the poem is helpful. It is easier to quote than complain.

> Get stuck in. Hurdy-gurdy the starter
> handle to make backfire. Call monthlies
> double-strength stale *fleurs du mal*. Too close
> for comfort | say it, *Herr Präsident*, weep
> lubricant and brimstone, wipe yo' smile.
> COMPETITIVE DEVALUATION—a great find
> wasted on pleasantries of intermission.
> Say it: licence to silence: say it: me
> Tarzan, you | diva of multiple choice,
> rode proud on oúr arousal-cárrousel.

It's not just that you can't make meaning from these lines; it's that even if you could you wouldn't want to. Clusters of colons, accent marks fleeing from Hopkins (Hopkins's accents are bullying even for a Jesuit), small caps, vertical slants (call them verticules) that sometimes mark an ambiguity but otherwise serve as little more than fancy pauses; Hill is an apprentice vandalizing the print shop.

Typography is the symptom of a failure deeper than font. The mixture of slang ("Get stuck in"), demotic ("wipe yo' smile"), pop culture ("me/ Tarzan"), and wordplay ("arousal-cárrousel") practices its instabilities in the terms of unmeaning. You might crank a Model A like a hurdy-gurdy and get backfire. Monthly magazines might be stale and "double-strength" (like a drug?), might be flowers of evil (can flowers be stale?), pathetic inheritors of Baudelaire. The labor of decoding comes at a price higher than the likely benefit.

The obscurities of modernism depended on convincing the reader the writing was worth reading, the tangle of tenses or snarl of syntax was made to be unraveled, that notes did not clatter down the page to no purpose, that ignorance preceded bliss (Eliot said, "Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood"). Hill has taken as subject (and method) the betrayals visited on the artist who would record the violence of our fallen world, who refuses to be complicit with those responsible. His profound and accelerating distrust of the serpent of language (devil and destroyer both—Hill wriggles like poor Laocoön) has made him fend off the reader. This is a poem hedged with razor wire, but the stance is lazy. It's more difficult to create a language that respects the complication of sense than to descend circle by circle into an Inferno of blitherings. You're reminded of the language Dante designed for Nimrod—a language no one but devils could understand.

Eliot, who called *The Waste Land* "a piece of rhythmical grumbling," presides over this poem from the margins: in the drop into demotic (clumsily handled by Hill), in a waste land no healing of the Fisher King could heal ("collops of sewage,/ wormed ribs jutting through rime"), in the multitude of voices (here the divided dictions of one voice, like a man receiving radio broadcasts through his fillings), in the drive from philosophy to flesh. Hill sees the governing presence as Daumier, the French caricaturist of middle-class pretense—but I'd say the mood is closer to the penny morality of Hogarth and the madhouse ravings of Ezra Pound. *Speech! Speech!* is too often a series of gabbling instructions, maledictions, blind meditations, public warnings:

> Seek modem-demo, memos to dawn broker,
> duty-savant. CODEBREAKERS our salvation.
> Logos of futures, world-scam, meniscus
> brinking, about to break, unbroken. Science
> not beyond reason. Ultimate hope. Take,
> e.g., Democracy—or try to take it—
> as cryptic but convenient acronym.

Most of this is convenient, and all of it cryptic. Hill has serious purpose (much of his poetry is about salvation, and the failure to save), and he's willing to nail himself to a cross to prove it—but also willing to climb down and display his stigmata in a freak show. If the instinct of speech is hesitant with its own betrayals, poetry can proceed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

only through silence or obscurity. Hill would like to invent a poetry monks could enjoy (if poems came as hair shirts, Hill would have his own designer label). Refusing to lower yourself to the mob is one thing, sneering at your readers another—it's not a matter of finding the fit though few when there *are* no fit and no few.

The obscurity of Hill's allusions might seem part of the problem, but the allusions here aren't particularly obscure. Colonel Fajuyi, invoked more than once, is one of a long line of secular saints Hill has paid homage to. The military governor of the Western Region of Nigeria, Fajuyi lost his life during a coup while attempting to protect a guest from assassination. He should remind us of Lot defending the two angels, his guests in Sodom. Among other bits of arcana, Wanhope is from *The Knight's Tale*, Sothsegger ("Truthteller") from the poem once known as *Richard the Redeless*, Hut Eight where Turing and his men worked to break the naval Enigma code, Daventry and Droitwich the earliest BBC long-wave transmitters. In *Speech! Speech!* it's not the allusions but the arguments that have fallen into mystery.

You could dismiss such a poem as a bad joke if there weren't hints of Hill's mortal power, of the poetry he refuses to write:

> First day of the first week: rain
> on perennial ground cover, a sheen
> like oil of verdure where the rock shows
> through;
> dark ochre patched more dark, with stubborn
> glaze;
> rough soggy drystone clinging to the fell,
> broken by hawthorns.

What can you do when a poet of major gifts refuses to employ them? If that's a crime, in what court can we punish it? Only the court of contempt. The things that make us admire certain poets can, with only slight alteration, turn them into poets we despair of. How little it took the Wordsworth of *Lyrical Ballads* to become the Wordsworth of *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*. There is one section in this valedictory poem that justifies the style, by partly refusing the style.

> ÁM discomfited | nót nów being able
> to take as fact even my own dying—
> the apprehension or prospect thereof. My
> faux-legalisms | are to be vouched for,
> even if unwitnessed, ás are many things
> I could indicate, but not show. Whát I see
> here | are unfixable fell-gusts | ratching
> the cranky chimney-cowls; their smókes blówn
> hard dówn or túgged rágged; shade and shine
> the chapel wind-vane's blistery fake gold.
> I imagine | yoú see this also: súch
> is the flare through memory of desire.

Strip away the nose studs and belly piercings, the antics that make hay of this, and you have the drowned compassion and misty recriminations of the most important poet since Lowell. Hill would be the saint of his phrases, not the sniggering martyr, if he didn't hate the humiliation of being read. You finish this poem in bewilderment and want to shout, "Author! Author!," just to have someone to blame.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Books

The blaming of Leonard Woolf

by Brooke Allen

It is for her beauty, her psychic pain, and the odd and tragic circumstances of her life as much as for the quality of her work that Virginia Woolf has attracted a certain type of critical attention; as one sharp commentator noted, she is the Marilyn Monroe of the intellectual world, "genius transformed into icon and industry." While Woolf's diaries and letters demonstrate that she could be cruel and vulnerable in equal parts, her popular image has come to elevate the vulnerabilities to the point of obscuring the tough, self-protective streak that sustained her and kept her alive and productive for a lifetime of nearly sixty years. An idealized and essentially misleading picture of Woolf as female victim of patriarchal oppression has become the dominant one, and countless stupid and condescending books and articles have supported it, the newest and stupidest being *Who's Afraid of Leonard Woolf* by the Australian author Irene Coates.[1]

Although Coates presents herself as a bold individualist who daringly trespasses on hallowed ground by suggesting that the Woolfs' marriage was less than idyllic and that Virginia was not really "mad" at all, her diatribe contains nothing new; it's merely the last in a long and not very distinguished line of psychostudies of the perennially fascinating writer. As long ago as 1977, Jean Love, in *Virginia Woolf: Sources of Madness and Art*, was referring to Woolf's "so-called madness," a tag Coates uses repeatedly. In 1978, Roger Poole's widely read book *The Unknown Virginia Woolf* established an entire school of anti-Leonard critical studies and advanced exactly the same theses that Coates insists upon: Leonard was a reductive, left-brained rationalist, constitutionally incapable of understanding or handling the sensitive artist he married, and Virginia's madness was no madness at all but an avenue of escape and creative independence. (Coates blithely ignores Poole's book, presumably because its existence negates her right to be considered an original thinker; his name does not appear in her text or bibliography.) Finally, in 1981 Stephen Trombley published *All That Summer She Was Mad: Virginia Woolf, Female Victim of Male Medicine*, another serious claim, and taken seriously by the academic community, that Virginia Woolf was sane.

Now there is some (very slight) excuse for Love, Poole, and Trombley: they wrote their studies before the publication of the plethora of information on manic-depressive illness that has recently become available to the general reader. In light of current knowledge, it has been widely accepted that Virginia Woolf, like many writers and creative artists, suffered from manic-depression, or bipolar disorder as it is also called. Hers was an almost textbook case, with onset oc-

1 *Who's Afraid of Leonard Woolf: A Case for the Sanity of Virginia Woolf*, by Irene Coates; Soho Press, 458 pages, $28.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

curring early in life and proceeding in periodic bouts broken up by long stretches of sanity and good health. Bipolar disorder is a hereditary condition, and several members of Woolf's family, the Stephens, also suffered from affective disorders. Virginia's father, Sir Leslie Stephen, and her brother Adrian both had a mild form of manic-depression bearing the clinical name of cyclothymia, while her other full siblings, Thoby and Vanessa, underwent periodic episodes of depression; one of their first cousins was a manic-depressive, and their half-sister Laura Stephen was either retarded or disturbed in some unidentified way—possibly she was autistic—and spent her life in an asylum.

To posthumously diagnose Virginia Woolf as a manic-depressive is not to go very far out on a limb. Yet many of Woolf's academic worshippers have passionately resisted the diagnosis, especially feminist scholars who have a great deal invested in the image of Woolf as a victim of patriarchal oppression, and who have fashioned an up-to-date Foucaultian model of Woolf's madness and femaleness as a form of transgression and "otherness." Another and more reasonable objection was the persistent use of the terms "mad" and "madness"—words used by Woolf herself—which are not at all useful in describing manic-depressive illness. Unlike, for example, schizophrenics, manic-depressives are normal most of the time, and suffer from their disease only periodically; literal-minded scholars—and so many Woolf scholars have been painfully literal—cannot accept that a woman who was clearly sane for much of the time can have had anything much the matter with her.

Other scholars and Woolf fans resisted the idea of manic-depression because they found it reductive to boil Woolf's genius down to pathology, as though it were the disease writing and not the woman. This is simply to misunderstand the nature of the illness, which does not flatten out the personality of the sufferer but if anything makes it more distinctly his or her own, intensifying and crystallizing the individual vision. Woolf, like Byron, Shelley, Robert Lowell, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and other sufferers from bipolar disorder, found rich material for her art in her periods of illness. "As an experience," Woolf wrote, "madness is terrific I can assure you, and not to be sniffed at; and in its lava I still find most of the things I write about. It shoots out of one everything shaped, final, not in mere driblets, as sanity does. And the six months . . . that I lay in bed taught me a good deal about what is called onesself." It cannot be a coincidence that such a high proportion of writers have been manic-depressives: medical studies have indicated that creative artists suffer from eight to ten times the rate of major depressive illness, ten to forty times the rate of manic-depressive illness, and up to eighteen times the rate of suicide of the general population.

If Irene Coates had spent a tiny fraction of the time reading about manic-depressive illness that she devoted to wallowing in Bloomsburiana, she might have sensed the thinness of her theory. (To take an example at random: she characterizes mania as "uncontrollable rage," when it is nothing of the sort.) There is not a single book on mental illness included in her bibliography, and this in spite of the fact that recent years have seen several first-class popularizations of the subject, notably Dr. Kay Redfield Jamison's *Touched By Fire: Manic Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*, which contains a chapter on Virginia Woolf and the Stephen family. Also strangely absent from Coates's bibliography is Thomas Caramagno's prize-winning *The Flight of the Mind: Virginia Woolf's Art and Manic-Depressive Illness* (1992), one of the few truly respectable and revealing books on Woolf's psychological history and its relation to her work to appear.

But Coates's argument for Woolf's sanity is only half of her agenda. The other half is her contention that Leonard Woolf was a sadistic, oppressive, scheming husband who married Virginia for her money and posi-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tion, promoted his own interests above hers throughout her life, was consistently unfaithful to her, and finally drove her to suicide.

I myself have always thought Leonard deserved the Purple Heart for keeping Virginia safe, cared for, and out of the nuthouse for three decades, but I am certainly prepared to listen to nasty gossip: Leonard has always sounded too good to be true, and, as Regina Marler pointed out in *Bloomsbury Pie*, her amusing study of the evolving public passion for all things Bloomsbury, the "saintly characterization of Leonard" in Quentin Bell's official biography of Virginia "invited reaction. . . . In later writings, Leonard would increasingly be portrayed as controlling, small-minded, tightfisted, and dogmatic, first as a husband, then as a literary executor."

Coates has a special ax to grind when it comes to Leonard. Author also of a pseudo-scientific tract called *The Seed Bearers: Role of the Female in Biology and Genetics*, she subscribes to a strict creed of male "left-brain" rationality and rigidity and female "right-brain" fluidity and flexibility, and ruthlessly presses these templates onto her two elusive subjects. Leonard had a "black and white, rigid left-brain," a "limited rationalist attitude"; he personified "the alienated and alienating male egocentricity that drives a man to attempt to make the world in his image." Virginia, as a right-brained woman with the additional advantage of having been spared the male-oriented classical education that stunted men like Leonard, was free to explore "the depth and precision of her perceptions."

> Throughout their partnership he embodied the heavy rock walls that were never able to confine her spirit. That free spirit was able to descend down the column of upward energy when the walls he erected around her loomed too ominously over her head; in this way Virginia escaped from him to find enrichment in the darkness below.

Woe betide the critic or biographer who sets herself the task of writing about, and sitting in judgment upon, people vastly more intelligent, subtle, humorous, and educated than she: this is the job Coates has taken on, and she is sadly unequal to it. When Leonard characterizes his kindergarten teacher for example, a Mrs. Mole, as "incompetent," Coates chastises him for expressing "male contempt for women's intellectual capabilities." When he describes how he and his brother managed as school captains to change the atmosphere of their prep school, "as we were both strict disciplinarians . . . from that of a sordid brothel to that more appropriate to fifty fairly happy small boys under the age of fourteen," she leaps to the titillating conclusion that Leonad thus "learnt to wield power at an early age and taste the pleasures of being a 'strict disciplinarian.'" And of course that pleasure would lead inevitably, according to a mind soaked in late twentieth-century intellectual clichés, to further exercises in misogyny and imperialism. Leonard, serving with the Colonial Civil Service in Ceylon, came to "personify the belligerent, autocratic imperialist administrator and was able to indulge to the full the strict disciplinarian side of his nature," claims Coates, not troubling to provide any evidence for this statement; he also had an "appalling attitude towards women, who are objectified." As if all men don't objectify women! In any event Coates herself isn't above a little objectification: you can hardly get through a paragraph of her prose without stumbling over the ubiquitous word "patriarchy."

Simplification to the point of fatuity is at work throughout Coates's book. For instance: "Virginia, unlike Leonard, was open and straight in all her relationships." That touchy, mercurial, malicious, and masochistic woman—open and straight? Or Virginia "became a lesbian with Vita because she was starved of the essential water of love." *Became* a lesbian, when by her own admission she had never been physically attracted to any man, including her husband?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Or—and this is my favorite—"We cannot apply conventional standards to members of the Bloomsbury Group, since they were rebelling against Victorian constraints." In the tradition of recent Woolf scholarship, Coates takes dangerous liberties with her facts, cheerfully reading Woolf's fiction as literal autobiography. (In an outrageous aside, she asserts that "It is admissable in [Woolf's] case to read much of her creative writing as autobiographical, at least as something remembered because it was felt intensely at the time.") Worse, she invents scenes between her key players, Leonard, Virginia, Vanessa Bell, and others and presents them as though they actually occurred.

But it is pointless to enumerate the hundreds or even thousands of false conclusions, clueless comments, and missed points in this book. Embarking on her researches with a firm conviction of her own righteousness, Coates found no reason to adjust her theories as she proceeded: "Whether anyone else agrees with me," she writes in conclusion, "I neither know nor, deeply, care." She presents Virginia's last year or so as high melodrama, with Leonard in a sinister role: he keeps Virginia isolated; forces her down on her hands and knees to scrub floors; gets involved in a shady conspiracy with their neighbor Dr. Octavia Wilberforce (in reality a kind and generous friend to both the Woolfs); fornicates with the maid; and in the end stage-manages Virginia's suicide and dictates her final notes to himself and to her sister. Coates, like Roger Poole before her, quotes only the sources that might, when sufficiently removed from their context, serve to bolster her ridiculous notions and ignores Virginia's many letters and diary entries that speak of her love for Leonard, her dependence upon him, and her sense of peace when they are together. She also ignores all references to the real reasons behind Virginia's eventual decision to die: the worries that her psychotic episodes were becoming more frequent and her rising sense, as World War II progressed, that she was losing both her audience and her gift.

"I have come to believe," Coates says officiously, "that the Woolfs were inimical." Well, so are most married couples, to some degree at least. Coates would have done well to read the play whose title she ripped off to make her own, Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* At one point in the play George, enraged by Martha's drunken accusations, shouts out "I can't stand it!"—to which Martha shoots back something to the effect of "You can stand it! You married me for it!" Now there is a little of George and Martha in nearly every couple, and the Woolfs were no exception. If Virginia decided to share her life with a perhaps excessively rationalistic man, it was because she, with her overdeveloped sensibility and fragile emotional defenses, needed that quality: similarly, however much Leonard might have chafed under the constraints of being an on-again off-again nursemaid, he was eminently suited to the task and must have found a certain fulfillment in it, or he would never have stuck it out for thirty years.

There is something weird and wonderful about every long-term marriage, and the Woolfs' was more complicated than most. For Irene Coates, who would be hard put to make sense of anything more subtle than *Thomas the Tank Engine*, to try to analyze a partnership that has puzzled some of the finest critics of the century is an absurdity that doesn't, in the end, merit the slightest notice—not even a dismissive review like this one. Not that the hubris of contentious ideologues like Coates will be punctured by adverse criticism. As Quentin Bell wrote to Sylvia Plath's daughter Olwyn Hughes, commiserating about her struggles with legions of Plath scholars, "It is in fact amazing how closely these creatures seem to resemble each other: the leaden prose, the persistent lying, the equivocations, the crude feminism. I know them all from personal experience. And the worst part is that they teach." And, he might have added, they keep coming—with no apparent end in sight.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Larger than proof

John L. Casti and Werner DePauli
Gödel: A Life of Logic.
Perseus Books, 224 pages, $25

reviewed by Martin Gardner

David Hilbert, the great German mathematician (he died in 1943), had a stupendous, dazzling vision. He hoped and believed that some day mathematicians would construct one vast formal deductive system with axioms so powerful that every possible theorem in all of mathematics could be proved true or false. Such a system would have to be both consistent and complete. Consistent means it is impossible to prove both a statement and its negation. Complete means that every statement in the system can be proved true or false.

In 1931, to the astonishment of mathematicians, a shy, reclusive Austrian, Kurt Gödel, aged twenty-five, shattered Hilbert's magnificent dream. Gödel showed that any formal system rich enough to include arithmetic and elementary logic could not be both consistent and complete. If complete, it would contain an infinity of true statements that could not be proved by the system's axioms. What is worse, even the consistency of such a system cannot be established by reasoning within the system. "God exists," a mathematician remarked, "because mathematics is consistent, and the devil exists because we can never prove it."

I recall a cartoon by Robert Monkoff which shows a man in a restaurant examining his bill. He is saying to the puzzled waiter: "The arithmetic seems correct, yet I find myself haunted by the idea that the basic axioms on which arithmetic is based might give rise to contradictions that would then invalidate these computations."

Fortunately, arithmetic can be shown consistent, but only by going outside it to a larger system. Alas, the larger system can't be proved consistent without going to a still larger system. Many formal systems less complex than arithmetic, such as simple logic and even arithmetic without multiplication and division, can be proved consistent and complete without going beyond the system. But on levels that include all of arithmetic, the need for meta-systems to prove completeness and consistency never ends. There *is* no final system, such as Hilbert longed for, that captures all of mathematics. "Truth," as the authors of this new book encapsule it, "is larger than proof."

Statements that are true but unprovable inside a formal system are called "Gödel undecidable." Like consistency, they can be shown true by a meta-system, but the larger system is sure to contain its own unprovable statements. There is no escape from the endless regress of meta-systems, each with undecidable theorems.

Many books and thousands of technical papers have dealt with Gödel's epochal bombshell and its implications. Several excellent biographies of Gödel have been published. *Gödel: A Life of Logic*, by the American science writer John Casti and the mathematician Werner DePauli of the University of Vienna, is a splendid nontechnical account of the Gödelian revolution and at the same time a sketch of Gödel's eccentric life and its tragic ending.

The authors begin with Gödel's birth and childhood in Brno, a city now part of the Czech Republic, where he became fluent in German, French, and English. In 1924, he settled in Vienna. There his philosophical interests put him in contact with the famous Vienna Circle of philosophers whose leaders were Moritz Schlick and Rudolf Carnap.

Gödel's ingenious method of proving undecidability is explained by Casti and DePauli as clearly as possible in a book for general readers. The argument requires attaching a prime number (a number with no divisors except itself and 1) to each symbol in a sentence expressing a theorem. Multiplying the prime numbers gives a product which, because it has a unique set of prime factors, is a unique coding of the sentence. By applying a "diagonal proof" which Georg Cantor had used to show that the infinity of real numbers exceeds the infinity

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of whole numbers, Gödel was able to construct a number that codes a true sentence which states its own unprovability. In later decades a raft of simpler ways to obtain the same result has been devised, many by the American logician Raymond Smullyan.

In 1940, now world famous, Gödel joined the staff of eminent thinkers at the Institute for Advanced Study, in Princeton, where he and Einstein became good friends. "I used to see them walk to work together," Murray Gell-Mann recalls in his autobiography. "Did they discuss deep mathematical or physical questions? . . . or was their conversation mainly about the weather and their health problems?"

Although Gödel continued to make significant contributions to mathematics, as he grew older his speculations became more and more bizarre. In a contribution to *Albert Einstein: Philosopher Scientist*, an anthology edited by Paul Schlipp, Gödel proposed a model of the universe difficult to take seriously. He conjectured that the universe is rotating in such a peculiar way that it generates closed time-like loops along which a spaceship could travel into the past and future. Following Kant, Gödel believed time to be a subjective illusion. The universe itself is timeless; what William James called a "block universe" in which past and future exist in an eternal now. In such a cosmos, free will obviously is also an illusion, and it is impossible for anyone to alter either the future or the past. How, one wonders, did Gödel avoid the paradoxes of time travel into the past, such as killing yourself, or performing other acts involving your duplicate—acts not in your memory? Gödel's way out was surprisingly feeble. He argued that travel to the past required such high speeds and long distances that not enough fuel would be available!

Strongly influenced by Leibniz, and by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl, Gödel outlined his own curious version of the ontological argument. This old argument claims to prove that the nonexistence of god, the most perfect of all beings, implies a logical contradiction. Gödel was a philosophical theist who not only believed in a personal god, but also in an afterlife. Because humans have an infinite potential for development, he insisted, it would be absurd for god to create us without allowing for such progress.

As he aged, Gödel became increasingly preoccupied with occultism, reincarnation, and parapsychology. He believed in the reality of ESP and ghosts. He was convinced that his wife Adele, a former nightclub dancer, had strong powers of precognition.[1] He believed that our "self" is more than just the physical brain: "The notion that our ego consists of protein molecules," he said in a letter, "seems to me one of the most ridiculous ever made."

Gödel's philosophy of mathematics, Casti and DePauli make clear, was one of extreme Platonic realism. He thought mathematical objects such as numbers, triangles, and even Cantor's transfinite sets, are as real and independent of human minds, though in a different way, as pebbles and planets.

Bertrand Russell, in the second volume of his autobiography, speaks of discussions he had at Einstein's house with Gödel, whom he mistakenly calls Jewish. "Gödel turned out," Russell writes, "to be an unadulterated Platonist, and apparently believed an eternal 'not' was laid up in heaven, where virtuous logicians hope to meet it hereafter."

Here is how Gödel replied in an unsent letter:

> As far as the passage about me [in Russell's autobiography] is concerned, I have to say *first* (for the sake of truth) that I am not a Jew (even though I don't think this question is of any importance), 2) that the passage gives the wrong impression that I had many discussions with Russell, which was by no means the case (I remember only one). 3) Concerning my

1 Adele was an attractive, contentious, antisocial, uneducated woman with atrocious taste. She once planted a pink flamingo outside her Princeton home. Gödel's taste, his biographer John Dawson commented, was no better. He thought the flamingo was "charming."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> "unadulterated" Platonism, it is no more "unadulterated" than Russell's own in 1921 when in the *Introduction [to Mathematical Philosophy]* he said "[Logic is concerned with the real world just as truly as zoology, though with its more abstract and general features]." At that time evidently Russell had met the "not" even in this world, but later on under the influence of Wittgenstein he chose to overlook it.

As Gödel neared death he became increasingly depressed and paranoid. He began refusing food because he thought he was being poisoned. Somehow Adele managed to keep him alive until his weight dropped to sixty pounds and he stopped eating altogether. His death was a suicide brought on by self-inflicted starvation. He left a vast quantity of unpublished papers, and notes kept in a long forgotten German shorthand called the Gabelsberger method.

Casti and DePauli devote the last half of their book to ramifications of Gödelian undecidablity, including the amazing discoveries of IBM's Gregory Chaitin about random numbers, too technical to discuss here. In England, Alan Turing translated Gödel's results into the operation of computers. He showed, using arguments similar to Gödel's, that it is impossible to build a computer that can decide the truth or falsity of every mathematical question. Given a conjecture and a program for testing it, a computer will stop after a finite number of steps if it finds the theorem true or false. But there are undecidable questions it will keep testing forever. The authors are skillful in explaining the "halting problem" as it applies to an idealized computer known as a Turing machine.

Not all undecidable theorems must be true. They can be true or false, and in some cases can be assumed either true or false. For example, consider Euclid's notorious parallel postulate: that through a point outside a straight line one and only one parallel to the line can be drawn. The postulate is undecidable in a system based on Euclid's other axioms. If assumed true, it leads to Euclidean geometry. If assumed false, it leads to systems of non-Euclidean geometry.

Because laws of physics are expressed mathematically, the possibility arises that the universe may also have its undecidable laws. "Some of our colleagues in particle physics," wrote the physicist Freeman Dyson in *Infinite In All Directions*,

> think that they are coming to a complete understanding of the basic laws of nature. . . . But I hope [this] . . . will prove as illusory as the notion of a formal decision for all of mathematics. If it should turn out that the whole of physical reality can be described by a finite set of equations, I would be disappointed. I would feel that the Creator had been uncharacteristically lacking in imagination.

For decades Fermat's last theorem—the conjecture that $a^n + b^n = c^n$ has no solution if n is an integer greater than 2—was thought by some mathematicians to be undecidable until it was proved true. Today the outstanding unsolved problem in number theory is Goldbach's conjecture. It states that every even number greater than 2 is the sum of two primes in at least one way. All number theorists believe it, partly because it has been tested to monstrously large even numbers, and partly because the larger the number the more ways it can be a sum of two primes. Is it possible that Goldbach's conjecture is undecidable? Two publishers, England's Faber and Faber and New York's Bloomsbury Books, have offered a million dollars for a proof of Goldbach's conjecture before March 15, 2002. The offer is a promotion for a Greek novel by Apostolos Doxiadis with the English title *Uncle Petros and Goldbach's Conjecture*. It tells how Petros Papachristos was driven mad by his vain efforts to prove Goldbach's conjecture before he decided it was undecidable.

It is easy to show that if Goldbach's theorem is undecidable it must be true. Assume it is undecidable and false. Then, there will be a counterexample, an even number not the sum of two primes, which a computer could find in a finite number of steps.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This makes the theorem undecidable, thus contradicting the assumption that the conjecture is undecidable and false. Therefore it must be undecidable and true.

Casti and DePauli also take up a question which is currently controversial. Does the fact that computers are unable to decide an infinity of conjectures show that our minds are superior to computers because we can often construct meta-systems, with intuitively reasonable axioms, that will decide such questions? This thesis was first strongly defended by the Oxford philosopher J. Anthony Lucas and more recently by Oxford's mathematical physicist Roger Penrose, among others. Almost all artificial intelligence experts disagree. They are convinced that computers of the kind we know how to build—that is, computers made of wires and switches—are capable in principle of doing as well as humans in finding meta-systems. Indeed, some experts believe that computers will soon cross a threshold of complexity that will enable them to do everything that human minds can do. The physicist Jeremy Bernstein, in one of his books, recalls that as a student he once asked the great Hungarian mathematician John von Neumann, a friend and admirer of Gödel, if computers would ever replace mathematicians. "Sonny," von Neumann replied, "don't worry about it."

Shorter notices

Kathleen Burk Troublemaker: The Life and History of A. J. P. Taylor.
Yale University Press, 506 pages, £19.95

A. J. P. Taylor was once a household name. A fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, and a member of the British Academy, he was treated as an authority on history and politics, and his books were sometimes compared to those of Gibbon or Macaulay. Appearing on BBC television, a natty little man sporting a bow-tie, he lectured without notes in a voice that had a cocksure snap to it. He published a prodigious number of articles, especially in the Beaverbrook press. And all this was mystifying, because he was scandalously wrong and deceitful about almost everything. The reader will be further mystified by Kathleen Burk's biography.[1] A former pupil of his, she maintains that he still deserves respect.

Taylor was a rich man's son. When in 1919 his father sold his share of the family's Lancashire cotton business, he received £100,000, which, as Kathleen Burk says, is £20 million in 1995 prices. Good fortune generated guilt, and many people between the wars tried to cover it up by proclaiming themselves to be left-wing. Sure enough, Taylor joined the Communist Party, and in 1925 visited the Soviet Union. A tourist's trip was enough to convince him that Soviet Russia was paradise. All his life he remained the daftest sort of fellow-traveler, notorious for once writing, "In the end, Stalin was a rather endearing character" (omitted by Kathleen Burk). Needless to say, he bought fast cars for himself, insisted on the best wines, quarrelled with Magdalen College over his housing, and kept the list of his shares on his desk, for regular consultation with his brokers.

In his youth he had admired the work of Bernard Shaw whose fame depended on standing generally accepted opinion on its head. This was Taylor's trick too. For him, the Habsburg and British empires were bad, while the nationalisms which destroyed them were good. British statesmen who made peace were incompetent, while Germans who made war, like Bismarck and Hitler, were defensible. In his most characteristic book, *The Origins of the Second World War*, he argued that Hitler was a politician like any other, taking his chances where he found them. Nazism, then, was a set of accidents, and not a deliberate program of conquest and mass-murder. Not surprisingly, Taylor is the darling of neo-Nazis and revisionists. It takes a very clever man to be quite such an idiot.

1 Yale University Press will publish *Troublemaker* in the United States this coming spring.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Taylor was my tutor at Magdalen. His teaching consisted of indoctrination. Conceit and self-promotion had long since replaced scholarship. Taylor spoke no Russian, and I came to doubt the standards of his German and French. One day he told me that diabolical White Russian exiles in the Baltic had invented the idea of Gulag and Soviet death camps, and there were no such things. Soviet Russia, he liked to assert, was not an aggressive power, and Britain should form an alliance with it. When I argued, he hit out at me with a poker. He who had made sure to be exempt from war service regularly humiliated another of his pupils who had won the Military Cross in Kenya against the Mau Mau. During one tutorial, he pulled out a thick bundle of the old five-pound notes and began counting. Shortly before, a messenger from the Beaverbrook press had delivered his earnings. With meaning, he said, "This is what it is all about."

More than money, though, he admired power. This was the overriding snobbery which led him to fabricate apologies for the likes of Bismarck and Hitler and Stalin, and to become the sycophant of Lord Beaverbrook and Sir Oswald Mosley, themselves lesser power-maniacs. When I told him that his depiction of Hitler was contradicted by the documents, he answered with that snap, "I trod on their toes this time," as though that were a serious defense. One maddened BBC producer was exactly right when he objected to Taylor's "stating his conjectures and opinions as objective facts."

Kathleen Burk downplays the irresponsibility of Taylor's fellow-traveling and his power snobbery. Although better at describing how lonely and pitiful his life was, she resorts to many fine euphemisms, calling Taylor "not altogether a mean man," while dwelling on his money-spinning contracts and fees. She speaks of sexual frustration in his three marriages. His first wife took up with Dylan Thomas, and that gifted sponger comically managed to extract *lots of* Taylor money. But Kathleen Burk fails to appreciate how fatal to the man it was to have no moral structure, and how fatal to the historian to have no sense of truth. His books have withered, but he himself remains an archetype of the intellectual whose self-deception and hypocrisy degraded the period.

—David Pryce-Jones

Peter Makin, editor
Basil Bunting on Poetry.
Johns Hopkins University Press
232 pages, $42

From an American vantage point, it may seem as if the Northumbrian poet Basil Bunting by rights ought to round out a raffish group portrait alongside Welshman David Jones and Scotsman Hugh MacDiarmid, unreconstructed renegades from the brambly fringes of modern English letters who appear to have put their talent into their work and their genius into their idiosyncrasy. What makes Bunting (1900–1985) an anomaly of another color, however, is that he continues to be principally known for having made common cause with a roughneck Yank by the name of Pound. "One of Ezra's more savage disciples," is how Yeats put it, and that was long before Bunting produced *Briggflats* (1966), his magnum opus in the densely orchestrated late Pound manner that certified the affiliation once and for all. These trappings have assured Bunting a secure niche in the voluminous annals of Poundiana, figuring in the festschrifts as a charter clan member and a pivotal British claimant in the collateral descent of the Pound line.

For all that, the circumstantial evidence suggests that Bunting was a combustible force unto himself, large enough to contain, if not multitudes, then at least an unruly bundle of contradictory impulses. Quaker-educated and a conscientious objector in the Great War; student at the London School of Economics and an editor at Ford Madox Ford's *Transatlantic Review* (where he succeeded a young gun named Hemingway); a self-taught translator from the classical Per-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sian, which led to an eventfully checkered diplomatic posting and a tenure as Persian correspondent for the London *Times*; an inveterate peripatetic who lived in Paris, Italy, the U.S., and the Canary Islands, yet also a fierce provincial who was drawn back to his native shires in midlife and toiled obscurely as a newspaperman—it is not exactly the curriculum vitae of a born camp follower.

So where did it ultimately take him, this path of most resistance? And what does his perseverance add up to: the triumph of an iconoclast or the tribulations of an epigone? The first thing that can be said for *Basil Bunting on Poetry*, a diverting volume of lectures gamely reconstructed from rough drafts and audiotapes, is that it should squelch the temptation to caricature Bunting as some roaring Caliban sprung into free verse by Pound's rough magic. On the contrary, it's a measure of his resilient instincts and ambidextrous enthusiasms that his presence survives these disinterred orations with such bracing panache, still vividly serving notice that we're in the company of a tough old bird with a mind of his own and an ear to be reckoned with. The university lecture hall, one might have thought, should have held about as much allure as an army barracks for a maverick of Bunting's bent, yet there he was, holding forth fortnightly with all due gusto at Newcastle University over the 1969–70 term, and again in 1974. What's more, he comes off as entirely in his element, plainly well-pleased to have received the casting call to play the indomitable tribal elder.

Despite a sidelong disclaimer that his views are but those of a "browsing amateur," Bunting's determination to hold court on the English word hoard is evident from the outset. Instead of rehashing the old turf wars or indulging in anecdotal palaver, he lays out in his opening lectures an expansive narrative scheme with a bold revisionist thrust, harking back to the deep ancestral past (the bedrock four-beat measure of Anglo-Saxon verse, the sinuously stylized art of the Lindisfarne Gospels, the shapely rhythmic architecture of Tudor songcraft), and then proceeding to build a case for seeing the metrical and compositional revolt of Pound, Zukofsky, and company as a radical restoration of authentic musical form over the deadening tick of the metronome.

Heady stuff, however you slice it, and what a furious scratching of notes it must have set off in the lecture hall as the students tried to get it all down. Bunting's main contention, fleshed out rigorously early on and somewhat raggedly as he presses onward, runs something like this. The seeds of English poetry's corruption were sown almost as soon as verse prosody began to be codified in the Elizabethan period, as its prominent makers and framers failed to take their cues from the supple, wiry acoustics of Wyatt and were fatally seduced by the opulent diction and decorative mannerisms of Spenser. The consequence of blundering down this garden path, as Bunting tells it, was the stifling of a rhythmically limber verbal music based on natural English stress patterns in the misbegotten pursuit of an artificial prosody contrived to ape classical measures and continental "numbers." Thus duped into hearing verse cadence "not as it was written, by the poet's ear, but by the inept notions of prosodists," poets striving to hew to the English metrical tradition have been trying to thrash their way out of the accentual-syllabic briar patch ever since.

It would be charitable at best to say that Bunting welds these tendentious premises into a wholly persuasive hypothesis. Some of the residual unevenness is owing to the sketchy condition of Bunting's drafts (and in the case of the 1974 lecture series, a rash of lacunae), but no allowances for the gallant salvage operation that has gone into assembling this volume can dispel the feeling that much of what seems peculiarly makeshift and willfully unconventional here is more or less an accurate holograph of Bunting's spiky sensibility. Even Makin, every inch the Bunting loyalist, concedes as much from time to time. (It is a trifle disconcert-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing, for example, to thumb back to the first of his copious endnotes and light upon the following caveat lector: "The reader should treat the historical detail in these lectures with caution; its value is sometimes more mythical than factual.") But say what you will, the man knew how to command the bully pulpit. By way of buttressing his overarching themes, Bunting quotes liberally, dilates eclectically, fulminates irascibly, needles tartly, and most stimulating of all, riffs brilliantly:

> So the poets gradually lost touch with music. They lost sight of the vast variety of possible rhythms. The noise they made became monotonous, and though they tried to compensate for that by wit, the monotony was infectious —the wit, the syntax, the diction, all became stereotyped. They aimed at neatness. They achieved the sterile emptiness of a hospital corridor. There was no substitute for music as a guide. A poet must write by ear (nearly all poets compose *aloud*); if he starts counting syllables and heeding the rules prosodists invent, writing verse becomes a pedantic game on a par with crossword puzzles.

Passages of this sort—and they are rife, yeasty amalgams of shop talk, table talk, and waggish expostulation—pack more than enough salient pith and bite to redeem the patchiness of Bunting's grand unified theory. And while there are moments when he will leap onto his hobbyhorse and tear off in all directions at once, over the long haul they are far outnumbered by stretches of insightful close reading and clear, sharp writing, grounded throughout by a tonic aversion to cant and a salutary streak of sturdy English empiricism. In this respect, Bunting acquits himself as a worthy match for his old master in the courage of his convictions—and clearly superior in expounding strong opinions without having recourse to the hectoring, browbeating spleen that roils Pound's didactic prose. There is also the saving grace of Bunting's bluff good humor, as displayed in this brisk little cadenza on the mixed fortunes of Wordsworth:

> He understood from the admonitions of Coleridge and the example of Pope that a poet ought to propound a complete system of philosophy, and that left him rather in a hole, because while Pope had Bolingbroke to provide the philosophy (such as it was), he had only Coleridge, who promised it but never kept his promise. So the great philosophical poem that was to be the business of Wordsworth's life dwindled to a prelude, and some skirmishing with morals by way of an *Excursion* away from the theme that never got started.

Makin, for his part, annotates industriously yet in his preoccupation with armature and arcana leaves a number of compelling questions about Bunting's general relevance and influence unsifted. Did this stint as a lecturer signal an important shift in his critical recognition at home and abroad? Has his stock in the UK risen in recent years? Is his panoptic *Briggflatts* to be regarded as a tour de force, to be reckoned with as the English answer to the nativist testament of *Paterson*, or does it bear closer comparison to a craggier, nore forbidding epic like Zukofsky's *A* or the sawtoothed *Cantos* themselves? It is not as if Makin has been derelict in brushing over these matters, for he has no doubt performed a valuable service for his fellow adepts (the sort of folks who would already have a copy of his critical study *Bunting: The Shape of His Verse*, on their shelves), as well as for up-and-coming dissertators. Still, it would be ruefully ironic and a bit of a pity if his academic taxidermy were to put off the agnostic reader who might otherwise take emboldenment from the animated ruminations of Bunting the browsing amateur. Amid the current vogue for prosody handbooks and primers on poetics, which as a professionalized genre inclines toward the clinical, the homogenized, and the ingratiating, the sprawl and audacity and uncanny horse sense of these rough-and-ready disquisitions of a generation ago offer a timely reminder that an apprenticeship in the guild of poetry is never finished, only abandoned.

—David Barber

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Notebook

The Padilla affair in retrospect

by Stephen Schwartz

The Cuban poet Heberto Padilla, who died at the end of September, aged sixty-eight, was among those writers of whom it may be said that he made history, less by what he wrote or even thought than by the course of events, which in his case has in retrospect a dreadful inevitability. To understand his life and work, we must return to the moment at which his name first came to global prominence, in 1971, and we must recall the atmosphere of left-wing sanctity that then surrounded the personality and reputation of the Cuban tyrant.

Castro and his revolution had burst on a world ripe for some new apocalypse. The time was reminiscent of St. Paul's description of Roman society at Christ's birth: "the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now" (Romans 8:22). The end of the Eisenhower era was symbolized not only by the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960, but also by the seizure of Havana by Castro's bearded bands at the beginning of the previous year. Castro and his sidekick Ernesto "Che" Guevara opened up an entirely new chapter in the epic of radical illusions. Youthful and charismatic, they had more in common, it seemed, with Brando, Elvis, and Kerouac than with Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky.

The Cuban regime retained this magical aura for at least a decade. Cuban Communism was different, or so its foreign admirers chose to believe. It was alleged to be an authentic popular movement, not a party state imposed from outside. It supposedly fostered modern art, experimental literature, cinema, and dance, while protecting some measure of free intellectual discussion—"within the revolution," of course. Its cadres swayed to the rhumba and sang romantic songs in the tropical night.

The United States government took a stand against Castro almost from the beginning. And a tiny, almost invisible group of foreign observers wondered how long the fantasy could last. Would it really turn out to be true? Could there be a Communism without secret police tortures, public lying, and the regimentation of the mind? A few hints in an ominous direction were ignored: the Cuban Trotskyists were locked up but nobody at all cared about them; no more Western enthusiasts worried about Cuban homosexuals, who were sent to labor camps; and the loss of the right to strike by the once-militant Cuban labor unions went uncommented on.

And then, in 1971, came the Padilla case. Heberto Padilla, born in 1932, in the rural district of Pinar del Rio, had an impeccable Castroite background. Along with numerous other leading young Cuban intellectuals—including the film critic Guillermo Cabrera Infante and the ex-Communist journalist Carlos Franqui—he had been an enthusiastic supporter of the revolutionary struggle against the previous dictator, Fulgencio Batista. With the triumph of Castro, all three worked to produce a lively cultural

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

supplement, *Lunes de Revolucion* ("Revolution Monday") that accompanied the regime's official newspaper. Padilla produced a major volume of verse reflecting the moral temper of his generation: *El Justo Tiempo Humano* ("The Time of Human Justice").

As the 1960s wore on, however, and as the Castro regime became more open in its embrace of Moscow, symptoms of a more unsettling syndrome appeared. Cabrera Infante was, in effect, exiled to a diplomatic post, and eventually broke with the regime. Franqui, once one of the top revolutionary personalities, was removed from *Revolucion*, and disappeared into internal oblivion. In 1968, Castro applauded the Russian invasion of then-Czechoslovakia. The passionate lovers of insurrection sought for elaborate pretexts after that shock: I well remember the New York art critic Nicolas Calas, an old surrealist still sentimental about his Trotskyist youth, attempting to explain that Castro actually criticized the Russians while appearing to support them.

The same year, Padilla published a collection of verse with a curious title: *Fuera del Juego* ("Out of the Game"). But as yet his name was known only in Cuba. The book won a state literary award, the Casa de las Americas prize, and nobody abroad thought to ask from what game the author or his subjects had exited.

In 1971, however, the grim truth emerged. Padilla and his wife of the time, the poet Belkis Cuza Male, were arrested after the publication of an official polemic charging them with the typical counter-revolutionary tendencies all Communist regimes have perceived in writers: bourgeois decadence, excessive irreverence, insufficient enthusiasm for the achievements of the revolution, failure to produce the kind of simple doggerel "the people" ostensibly needed to spur them on to greater revolutionary heights. After several days away from the public, the two poets appeared at a meeting of the official National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists, obviously distraught, under the captaincy of an old Stalinist apparatchik, to engage in a really disgusting "self-criticism." The content was predictable: they were prone to errors, were weak, had served the imperialist enemy.

Famous writers and similar folk among the foreign "revolutionary tourists" who had so worshiped the Castro regime were devastated, for the mask had fallen. Castroism was merely Stalinism redux, with the same sleazy habits: forced confessions, the suicide of one's conscience, in the service of the state party and a police regime. Sartre, de Beauvoir, and other prominent defenders of Castroism issued a protest. More importantly, leading Latin American authors, such as Octavio Paz and Mario Vargas Llosa, both former Castro partisans, also denounced the masquerade.

Some of those who, to their credit, signed letters defending Padilla at that time, find it convenient today to forget the real circumstances of the incident. Susan Sontag, never failing to exploit an opportunity to twist the historical record, told *The Los Angeles Times* after Padilla's death that the affair had been "a huge event in the history of the terminal disenchantment of well-intentioned, justice-loving people who had hoped that small countries might somehow develop a third way of development." But this description is wholly inaccurate. Castro and Padilla had nothing to do with a "third way," but with the persistent, and ultimately absurd, search for a Communism without gulags. And a considerable number of those "well-intentioned, justice-loving people" did not turn against Third World revolutionism, if at all, until long after the horrors of Indochinese Communism became known to the world. At American universities, the Padilla affair is still most often cited as a cautionary tale about the weakness of literary types rather than about the inevitable atrocities of dictatorial radicals.

After his act of intellectual hara-kiri, Padilla, although now world famous, disappeared from sight in Cuba. He spent years working as a translator, notably of English verse. A decade passed before his expulsion to the United States.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Padilla was welcomed to the free world by a stunning list of literary celebrities. A bilingual volume, *Legacies*, was issued by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. It revealed him to be a poet of middling talent, stuck somewhere between a terse sort of Spanish modernism and outright imitation of Anglo-Saxon models. But Heberto Padilla was lost in America. He frequently went to Spain for solace, but there also he was more a political figure than a writer. His output declined dramatically, and he seemed in many respects to have been broken by his experiences. One immediately obvious consequence was his grievous alcoholism.

Padilla's isolation was also complicated by the unfortunate fact that he had tasted a global fame, as a victim of dictatorship, that he could not justify by his literary output. In exile, he suffered serious blocks, but produced two further volumes, *Heroes Are Grazing in My Garden*, a novel, and *Self Portrait of the Other*, a memoir. Neither gained much notice among American readers. He often tried to shelter himself in the Cuban exile community in Miami, but its provincialism frustrated him immensely. Robert Silvers of *The New York Review of Books*, another adept at the art of rearranging the past, told an untruth when he said to *The Los Angeles Times*, "He didn't throw in his lot with the anti-Castro community." Padilla was an active enemy of Castroism and, among other things, a supporter of the Nicaraguan contras.

But Silvers's revision of history, in which even an obvious case of martyrdom must be dressed up in radical pieties, speaks to the main dilemma faced by Padilla after his liberation. In intellectual America he became an unperson. I remember with outrage a leftist nincompoop in Berkeley who, introduced to Padilla, inquired with smarmy sincerity: "Do you hate your own people? Why else would you turn against the achievements of the Revolution?" And because the hardline left dominates Spanish literature departments at places like Berkeley, Columbia, Harvard, etc., Padilla was relegated to minor institutions, exemplified by the school where he was working when he died, Auburn University in Alabama. Heberto Padilla dead in Alabama!

While Castro persists in power, like some monstrous vampire, the memory of these events is fading now. A year ago, in Peru, I met a Castroite veteran, still a loyalist, whose face clouded over when I commented, on observing a photograph of "Che" Guevara, "we can never communicate to our children how exciting it all appeared at the beginning." In the aforementioned *Los Angeles Times* article, that paper's commentator, Steve Wasserman, wrote generously if somewhat hyperbolically about Padilla, calling him "Cuba's foremost poet." That is an opinion that could only be advanced by someone with little knowledge of Cuban literature, and particularly one who had never read or recognized the importance of, to begin with, the novelist, critic, and poet Jose Lezama Lima. But such superficial views are the norm when North Americans discuss Spanish literature, as we see from the continuing cult of Pablo Neruda.

Lezama Lima was also a victim of Castro—along with Cabrera Infante, the brilliant Reinaldo Arenas, the prose genius Virgilio Pinera, the folklorist Lydia Cabrera, and a long, long roster of other Cuban writers and thinkers. Fidel Castro has accomplished something no other Communist dictator achieved. In the mold of Mussolini, he has completely remade Cuban culture in his own image. He has convinced his still credulous supporters around the world that before his revolution Cuba, which had in fact been one of the literary powerhouses of the Castilian language, had no writers, no publishers, no respectable press. Castro drove virtually every important creative figure into exile or hounded them to death or silenced them.

Heberto Padilla, however famous he became, and for however brief a time, was only one among this hecatomb. That makes the obscurity of his death horrible, as abominable as the regime that oppressed and, truth to tell, destroyed him.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Letters

Life in Basqueland

To the Editors:

I wanted to take the time to briefly respond to Alexander Coleman's review of my book, *The Basque History of the World*, in your April 2000 issue because it attempted to be, and in many ways succeeded in being, an unusually thoughtful, reflective piece. I do take exception to the accusation that my book shows "bias," though, at the same time, I wonder if a book shouldn't show a clear point of view. Mr. Coleman's implication, however, was that I was unfair. And, what I found offensive was his assertion that I am an apologist for the misdeeds of a small fanatic Basque group known as ETA.

Curiously, reviews of this book have both praised it for fairmindedness and accused it of bias. The book enumerates all of the crimes, including the more than eight-hundred killings, of ETA, and points out that of late they have become so despicable that even Basque nationalists find their acts intolerable. But what I do that few others seem willing to do, and Mr. Coleman fails to mention, is to enumerate the many crimes —the killings, the systematic torture, the rampant brutality—of the Spanish government, and I show that these practices continue to this day. This is by no means an apology or an excuse for ETA's killings. It is simply a desire to be fair, to give both sides. This is more than most newspapers do when reporting on the Basques, though the Spanish record is well-documented and easily available.

Mr. Coleman regrets that I do not include in my book one Jon Juaristi, whom he grandly describes as "formerly a jailed militant"—somewhat of an exaggeration. Mr. Coleman "does not seem aware"—to use what seems to be one of his own favorite phrases—that Mr. Juaristi is a rather dubious character, given to colorful half-truths. I read a number of his books and articles but, after spending a long afternoon listening to him spin yarns, became skeptical. For example, his claim that he was a former member of ETA seemed suspicious, for he was unable to give any convincing details of such experiences. There seems to be no evidence of it and no one who remembers him in ETA or even as politically active. I have never heard even Juaristi use Mr. Coleman's claim that he was jailed. Is this a new embellishment?

Mr. Coleman says that Juaristi deserves to be quoted because he is "funny." I like a good quote as well as the next writer and was tempted to use some of his. But I was distrustful of the source. Even if he were to be believed, why would a former Etarist turned Basque-hater—bad judgment both ways—be a credible source? His information seems generally accurate but his conclusions, such as the quote used by Mr. Coleman, are merely glib, and offer no insight. My book includes far better critics of Basque nationalism, such as Miguel de Unamuno. Of course Unamuno is not always funny. I have a lot of humor in my books. I look for humor. But serious beliefs should be criticized by serious thinkers, not mocked by smart alecks. I try to be fair.

Mark Kurlansky
New York, N.Y.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Alexander Coleman replies

I do regret that Mark Kurlansky feels that I have imputed to him a wholesale pro-ETA bias in his splendid book. He *is* hard on both sides, but then again, he seems reluctant to take one further step and admit to the chicken/egg problem—the root causes of Basque violence. Surely Mr. Kurlansky does not think that the police actions taken (including many outside the law) by successive post-Franco governments were anything but enraged reactions triggered by ambushes and assassinations in the name of the lost cause—futility defined. In turn, what drives the cause is the dotty, febrile nationalism fomented from the nineteenth century on, as recounted in Jon Juaristi's seminal first study, *The Lineage of Aitor: The Invention of the Basque Tradition* (1987), not cited by Mr. Kurlansky, nor does he mention in his letter Juaristi's latest in-depth study of the mental structures of Basque nationalism, *Sacra Nemesis: More Histories of Basque Nationalists* (1999). I'm sorry: Sr. Juaristi is not the glib flake described by Mr. Kurlansky. He is considered, by some, to be the most penetrating student of the intractable Basque problem now writing, a scholarly esteem recently confirmed by his appointment to be the Director of the National Library, Spain's Library of Congress.

I stand corrected on one matter. Having pored over my notes, I see no mention of his ever having been jailed, and I retract such an inference with apologies.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

MOMA2000 revisited *by Hilton Kramer*
The letters of Kingsley Amis *by Joseph Epstein*
Hart Crane at 100 *by Eric Ormsby*
Patrick Leigh Fermor *by Ben Downing*
The architecture of Cass Gilbert *by Francis Morrone*
William Makepeace Thackeray *by Brooke Allen*
Emmanuel Chabrier *by James F. Penrose*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FISHERMAN'S WIDOW
Harkers Island, North Carolina

SENIOR FARMER'S WIDOW
Pellworm Island, Northern Frisia

ULRICH MACK:

Island People

November 17, 2000
– January 28, 2001

808 Gallery - Boston University
808 Commonwealth Avenue
Boston, MA 02215
617/358-0922

Opening Reception:
Friday, November 17, 2000

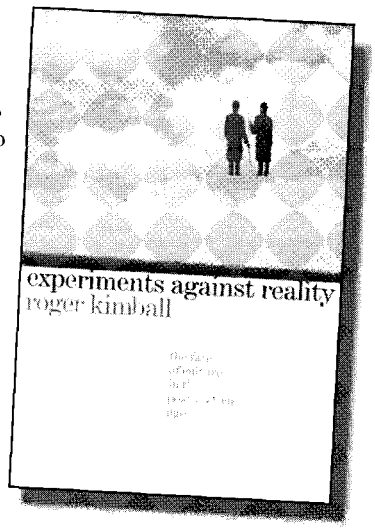
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ROGER KIMBALL

Experiments Against Reality

The Fate of Culture in the Postmodern Age

Is everything possible and nothing true? According to Roger Kimball, this belief, with its "mixture of gullibility and cynicism," characterizes much of our modern culture. Thus his sparkling new collection of essays, *Experiments Against Reality*, is "largely a chronicle of spiritual disillusionment." No one who is seriously concerned with the fate of our culture can afford to ignore it.



"Roger Kimball is a trenchant and courageous critic of contemporary culture, although his positive values and his historical grasp make him far more than a mere polemicist. These essays have a nineteenth-century breadth and a twenty-first-century timeliness; they are stylish, richly allusive, and immensely readable—and they are going to annoy all the right people."—JOHN GROSS

"Kimball places his subjects as clearly in their contemporary as in the larger, historical context. His position is conservative but not reactionary, humanistic but not populist, fresh but never trendy."
—JOHN SIMON

"Kimball is one of the ablest and most philosophically skilled critics on the current scene. *Experiments Against Reality* will be required reading for those who want a significant perspective on how and why our contemporary culture got to be the way it is."—FREDERICK MORGAN

"These essays on recent poets and thinkers, from T. S. Eliot to Wallace Stevens, from Foucault to Fukuyama, are as wise as they are elegantly written."—MARTIN GARDNER

"Even those who disagree will profit by reading a fine book by an heir of Lionel Trilling and Edward Shils."—SIR HUGH LLOYD-JONES

Just published

Ivan R. Dee, Publisher
Chicago • A Member of the Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group
At your bookseller, or order toll-free 1-800-462-6420 with a major credit card.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LITERAL Latté

It's The **READ** Thing.
Got **LATTE?**

MIND STIMULATING STORIES, ESSAYS, POETRY & ART

RAY BRADBURY, ROBERT OLEN BUTLER, STEPHEN DIXON, HARLAN ELLISON, NANCY MILFORD, CAROL MUSKE, LYNNE SHARON SCHWARTS, JOHN UPDIKE & EXCITING NEW TALENTS

"I WAS IMMEDIATELY ATTRACTED....I COULD FEEL THE RESTLESSNESS OF THE CITY BELOW THE STREETS, HEAR THE RUMBLE OF THE SUBWAY...PICK UP A COPY."
-LITERARY MAGAZINE REVIEW

"ONE OF THE BEST NEW VENUES FOR ANY SERIOUS WRITER....
WILL SEEP INTO AMERICAN LETTERS AND STAY THERE." *--SMALL PRESS REVIEW*

3RD ANNUAL AMES MEMORIAL
ESSAY AWARDS

FIRST PRIZE:
$1,000

2ND PRIZE: $300 3RD PRIZE: $200
7 HONORABLE MENTIONSS

GUIDELINES

*Unpublished Personal Essays.
All Topics. 6,000 Word Max.
***POSTMARK BY SEPT 5, '00**
*Name, Add & Tel # on Cover Page.
*Include SASE or Email for reply.
*$10 Entry Fee Per Essay. Or,
$15 Includes 1 Essay, Plus a
1 Year Subscription (Int'l, $25).

PUSHCART PRIZE WINNER
BEST AMERICAN POETRY HONORS

"(PUSHCART PRIZE} IS THE SINGLE BEST MEASURE OF THE STATE OF AFFAIRS IN AMERICAN LITERATURE TODAY."
--The New York Times Book Review

6TH ANNUAL
POETRY AWARDS

FIRST PRIZE:
$1,000

2ND PRIZE: $300 3RD PRIZE: $200
7 HONORABLE MENTIONSS

GUIDELINES

*Unpublished Poems,
All Styles. 2,000 Word Limit.
***POSTMARK BY JULY 1, '00**
*Name, Add & Tel # on Cover Page.
*Include SASE or Email for reply.
*$10 Entry Fee Per Set of (Up To) 6 Poems.
Or, $15 Includes 1 Set of Poems Plus a
1 Year Subscription (Int'l, $25).

ADDICTION GUARANTEED

FIRST TIME SUBSCRIBER OFFER:

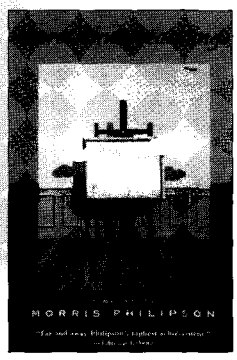
6 CUPS LITERARY SATISFACTION, $6 (Regularly $11)
CANADIAN SUBSCRIPTIONS, $20, INTERNATIONAL SUBSCRIPTIONS, $25
LITERAL **LATTE T-SHIRT, $15**

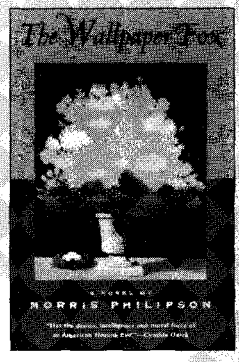
Send Check or Money Orders Payable To LITERAL LATTE
OR Send/Call In Visa/MC/AmEx Card Number & Exp Date

LITERAL LATTÉ
61 EAST 8TH STREET, SUITE 240, NYC 10003
(212) 260-5532 litlatte@aol.com www.literal-latte.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Classics from "a master storyteller."*





MORRIS PHILIPSON

A MAN IN CHARGE

"What a pleasure it is to read a novel about civilized people with whom one can identify solid, meaty, well-crafted storytelling."
—*Publishers Weekly*
Paper $15.00

SECRET UNDERSTANDINGS

"Far and away Philipson's highest achievement."
—*Chicago Tribune*
Paper $13.00

SOMEBODY ELSE'S LIFE

"An extended and absorbing mediation on the loss of integrity."
—*Chicago Sun-Times*
Paper $13.00

THE WALLPAPER FOX

"A swift, no-fudging narrative by a writer it is always rewarding to rediscover."
—Sophie Wilkins, *National Review*
Paper $12.00

*Christian Science Monitor

Available in bookstores.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

www.press.uchicago.edu

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Reconfiguring the New York School

THROUGH JANUARY 27, 2001

LENNART ANDERSON

LELAND BELL

NELL BLAINE

ROBERT DE NIRO, SR.

JANE FREILICHER

PAUL GEORGES

PETER HEINEMANN

LESTER JOHNSON

ALEX KATZ

ALBERT KRESCH

LOUISA MATTHIASDOTTIR

JAN MÜLLER

PHILIP PEARLSTEIN

FAIRFIELD PORTER

PAUL RESIKA

LARRY RIVERS

ALBERT YORK

CENTER FOR FIGURATIVE PAINTING
115 WEST 30TH STREET SUITE 202 NEW YORK NY 10001
TEL 212 868 3452 FAX 212 736 1520 EMAIL CFPSTUDIO@AOL.COM
WWW.ARTNET.COM/CFPSTUDIO.HTML TUESDAY – SATURDAY 12 – 6 PM

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FIRST ENCOUNTER
初次見面

Lu ShengZhong
呂勝中

From November 11, 2000
to January 12, 2001

Chambers Fine Art
210 Eleventh Ave., 2nd Fl
(corner of 25th St.)
New York, N.Y. 10001

Tel: 212 414-1169 - Fax: 212 414-1192

The New Criterion
850 Seventh Avenue
Suite 400
New York NY 10019

Periodicals Postage
Paid at New York, NY
and at additional
Mailing Offices

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED